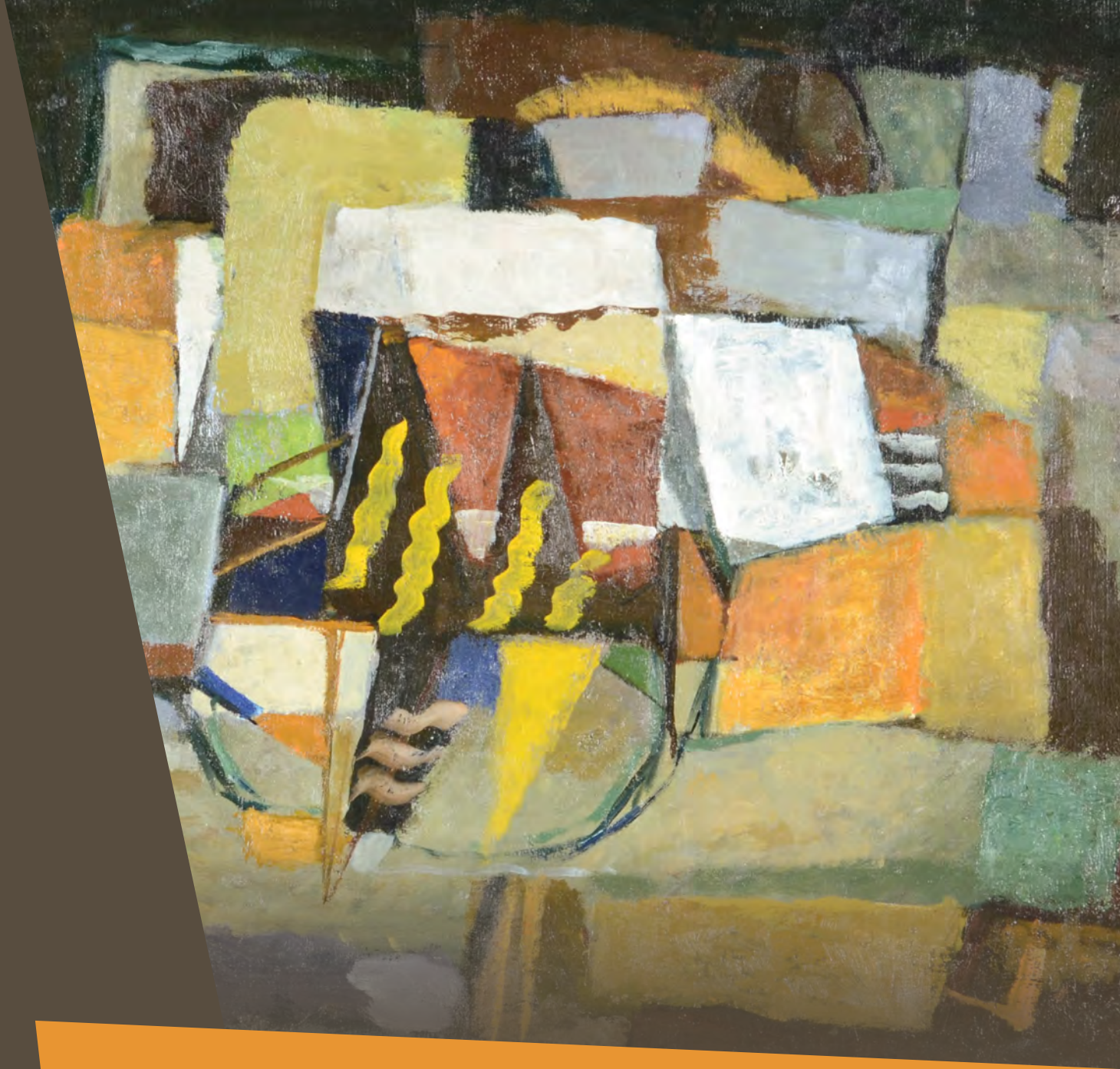




TRANSFORMATIONS
Lain Singh Bangdel, Art, Nepal

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TRANSFORMATIONS

Lain Singh Bangdel, Art, Nepal

Bangdel

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Exhibition

Transformations: Lain Singh Bangdel, Art, Nepal
February 4 - May 16, 2026
Asian Arts Gallery, Asian Arts & Culture Center, Towson University, Towson, Maryland, USA

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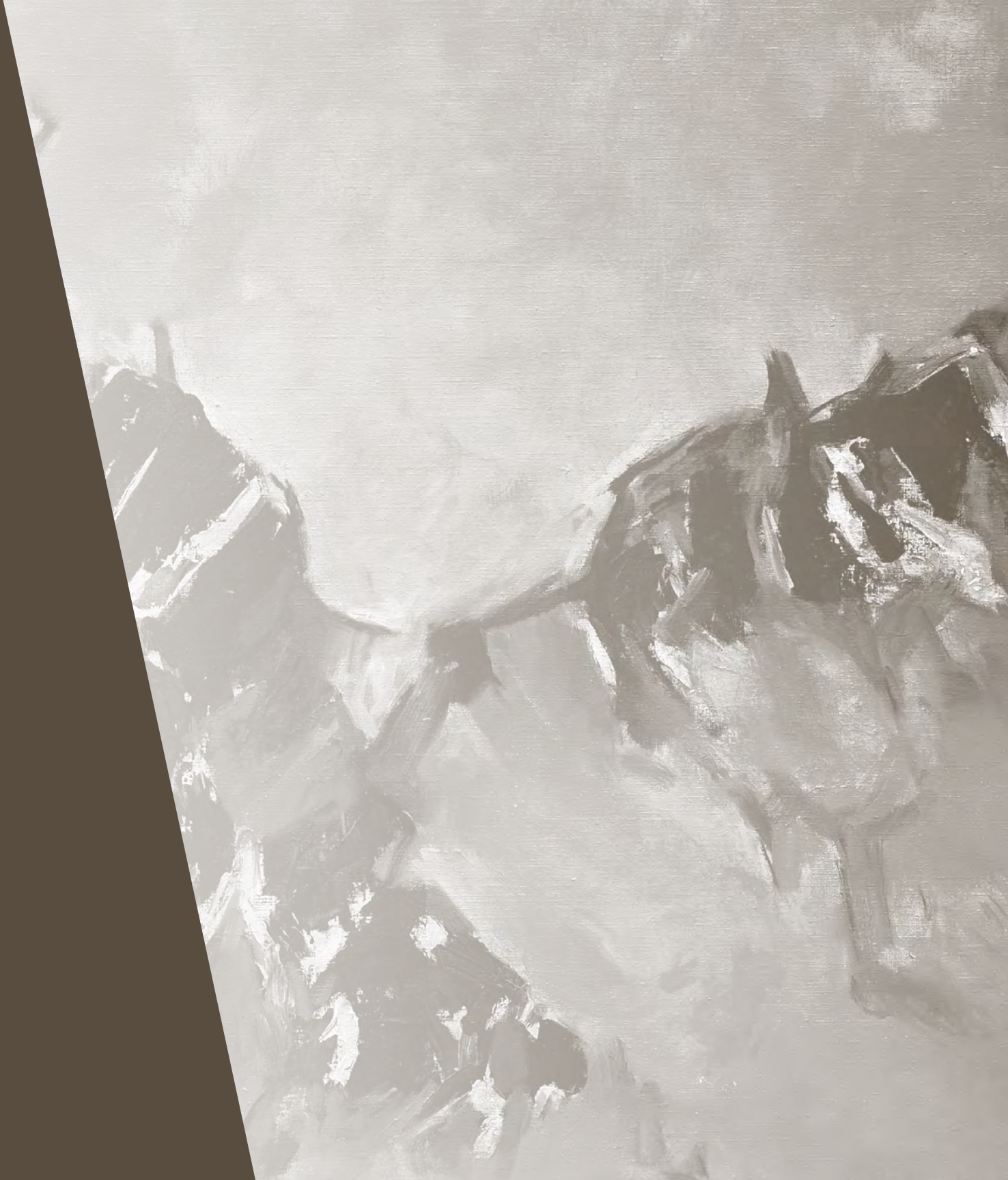
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DEDICATION



John Gilmore Ford (1928-2024)

The Asian Arts & Culture Center (AA&CC) dedicates this exhibition, Transformations: Lain Singh Bangdel, Art, Nepal, to the memory of John Gilmore Ford, our dear, decades-long friend and advocate for Asian arts and culture. John was a longtime member and friend of AA&CC who played a significant role in shaping the Center as we know it today. Over his forty years of devotion to the Center, John frequently served as a consultant, designed our current gallery and display cases, participated in numerous public talks and panel discussions, wrote introductions to many short catalogs, appraised our art collection, and curated several exhibitions featuring both traditional and contemporary art.

AA&CC is honored to commemorate John with the current exhibition Transformations: Lain Singh Bangdel, Art, Nepal, given John's lifelong connection to and love for Nepal. John served as chairman of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust from 1996-2004 after the retirement of Professor Eduard Sekler, Founder of the Trust and Chair of History of Architecture at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. Under John's stewardship, the Trust raised funds to restore and retrofit twenty temples. Many of them completely withstood the earthquake that devastated the Valley in 2015, while the remainder only suffered minimal damage.

John's legacy will endure in the works of art he championed and collected from India, Nepal and Tibet, which reside in the Ford Gallery at the Walters Art Museum.



FOREWORD

Bibhakar Sunder Shakya

"Transformation" is never a single event; it's a rhythm—of leaving and returning, learning and unlearning, carrying one world forward while making space for another. Few lives embody that rhythm as completely as Sir Lain Singh Bangdel (1919–2002)—painter, novelist, scholar, cultural guardian—and, to me, a beloved father-in-law whose integrity matched his brilliance. His art traced the contours of a changing Nepal even as it helped shape that change. To stand before his paintings is to sense both an artist and a nation coming of age together.

Transformations: Lain Singh Bangdel, Art, Nepal—presented by the Asian Arts & Culture Center at Towson University from February 4 to May 16, 2026—offers an intimate journey across five decades of Bangdel's creative life. It begins with the lyric realism of his early years in India, moves through the crucible of Paris where he absorbed and refashioned the visual language of modernism, and culminates in the distilled abstraction and symbolic

landscapes that defined his mature voice. Across these phases, one hears the steady pulse of home—Darjeeling's mist, Kathmandu's courtyards, the Himalaya's long horizon—translated into a modern vocabulary of line, color, and form.

Bangdel's transformations were never only stylistic; they were also ethical and civic. When he returned to Nepal in 1961 at the invitation of King Mahendra and Prime Minister B. P. Koirala, he understood that building a modern art movement was inseparable from building a modern nation. He helped establish institutions, mentored younger artists, organized early exhibitions of contemporary work, and insisted that cultural heritage is not a relic of the past but a living trust. His landmark book *Stolen Images of Nepal* (1989) exposed the theft of sacred icons with clarity and courage, prompting international repatriations and a renewed commitment to preservation. For him, painting and nation-making were parallel pursuits—both required vision, discipline,

and faith that beauty and truth are essential to public life.

The title *Transformations* refers to four interwoven threads. First, the transformation of the artist himself: from figuration to abstraction, from observation to revelation. Second, Nepal's transformation across the long twentieth century—monarchy and democracy, migration and modernization, loss and renewal. Third, the reciprocal transformation between art and identity, where works such as *Mother Nepal* embody a people's sorrow and resolve. And finally, the transformation of audiences—across generations and geographies—who find in Bangdel's work a language for their own searching and hope.

The selections gathered here illuminate these threads with clarity and grace. An early canvas like *Suburb of Calcutta* shows a young painter turning toward

social reality with tenderness rather than spectacle. *Muna Madan (Departing Scene)* refracts Devkota's beloved epic through fractured color and restless stroke, carrying the ache of separation that migrants everywhere know by heart. *Transformation* (1956) announces his leap into pure abstraction, where geometry, light, and negative space become instruments of meaning. *Moon Over Kathmandu* meditates on return and belonging—the city held in a hush beneath a watchful arc that echoes distant peaks. And in *Song of Himalaya*, the mountains seem to breathe, each ridge a note in a melody that rises beyond words. Seen together, these works show not a rejection of figuration but a translation of lived experience into a more elemental language.

This project is also personal. For much of my early life, I knew Bangdel primarily as a novelist whose books I admired. That changed in Columbus, Ohio, when I met his daughter, Dina Bangdel—an

art historian and curator whose intellect and compassion continue to guide my work. Dina taught me to look again: to see the decisions within a brushstroke, to recognize the ethics inside an archive, to hear the quiet labor that sustains institutions and communities. After her passing in 2017, I felt called to carry forward both her devotion and her father's legacy, through exhibitions, publications, films, and an expanding digital archive. It remains both a privilege and a responsibility held with enduring gratitude.

Transformations extends conversations begun in recent exhibitions in New York, Houston, London, Hong Kong, Ohio, and Denver, while opening new ones here in Maryland—between South Asian and American audiences, between diaspora memory and museum space, between students encountering these works for the first time and scholars returning with new questions. Towson University's Asian Arts & Culture Center is an ideal home

for such dialogue: a place where art is not removed from history or community, but animated by them.

My hope is that visitors will let these paintings unfold slowly. Notice how a field of blue holds a horizon you did not anticipate. How a line might read like a prayer. How a muted gray can carry the light of a distant storm. How the outline of a temple or a flag emerges, fades, and returns—like memory itself. Ask not only what you see, but what kind of seeing the work asks of you. In a time of constant noise, Bangdel's canvases ask for attention; in a time of fracture, they gather disparate worlds onto a single, breathing surface.

I am deeply grateful to the Asian Arts & Culture Center at Towson University for bringing this exhibition to life and for situating Bangdel within broader conversations about modernism, heritage, and identity. My thanks to

Joanna Pecore for her curatorial vision; to the dedicated staff who cared for every detail; to our lenders and collaborators whose trust made this possible; and to the artists and students who will carry forward these ideas. I also honor the Bangdel and Shakya families, and the wider community of friends across Nepal and the diaspora, who continue to nurture this legacy with love and dedication.

Ultimately, *Transformations* is an invitation to see Nepal's modern art, not as a marginal footnote to global modernism, but as a vital part of it; to recognize in Bangdel's life a model of artistic courage and civic faith; and to find within these paintings a language adequate to our own times of change. If visitors leave the gallery with a fuller sense of how art can help shape a nation—and how a nation, in turn, can shape an artist—then this exhibition will have done its work.

LAIN SINGH BANGDEL: ARTIST, WRITER, AND ART HISTORIAN

Bibhakar Sunder Shakya



Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002)

Nepal's Premier Modern Artist

Born in Darjeeling, shaped in the intellectual crucible of Calcutta (now Kolkata), and remade in the studios and museums of Paris and London, Lain Singh Bangdel's life traces a clear arc of transformation—personal, artistic, and national. From a Himalayan childhood of solitude and attentive looking to his later leadership at the Royal Nepal Academy, his journey models resilience without rancor and modernity without amnesia. Across canvases, novels, and landmark publications, Bangdel pursued a single ethic: the truth of feeling and Nepal's rightful place in a global conversation on art and identity.

He was more than a premier painter: a novelist, art historian, educator, institution-builder, and steadfast advocate of cultural stewardship. His career moves from figuration to abstraction, from exile to homecoming, and from private craft to public conscience. In his hands, modernism is both porous and rooted—Himalayan in breath, universal in grammar—translating memory and place into a contemporary idiom without surrendering specificity.

This essay draws on Bangdel's unpublished handwritten autobiography (Nepali), Donald Messerschmidt and Dina Bangdel's *Against the Current*, and Dina Bangdel's *Lain Bangdel: Fifty Years of His Art*. It is offered as tribute and invitation—to look closely, study deeply, and be inspired. To honor Bangdel is to affirm creativity's power to cross borders, speak truth, and help shape cultural destiny.

Introduction

Lain Singh Bangdel occupies a foundational place in the history of modern Nepali art. He was not only the nation's pioneering modernist painter but also a celebrated novelist, cultural historian, educator, and passionate advocate for Nepal's artistic and national identity. Over six decades, his work spanned genres, geographies, and generations—helping to define Nepal's cultural imagination while earning international recognition.

Born in Darjeeling and educated in Calcutta (now Kolkata), Bangdel discovered his mature artistic voice during a formative decade in Europe—Paris and London in the 1950s—where he transitioned from figuration to abstraction, merging Himalayan memory with the experimental language of modernism. When he arrived in Nepal in the early 1960s at the invitation of King

Mahendra and Prime Minister B. P. Koirala, he became a transformative force—founding and strengthening institutions, mentoring artists, authoring landmark texts, and advancing the protection of Nepal's cultural heritage. For a country newly emerging from political isolation, Bangdel embodied both a return to roots and an opening to the world.

His creative path was deeply shaped by solitude, loss, and migration. From childhood encounters with light and landscape in Darjeeling, to years of artistic struggle in Calcutta and Paris, Bangdel's life was a meditation on belonging. His early paintings reveal a profound empathy for the human condition, while his later abstractions distill light, space, and silence into forms of serenity and transcendence. Each canvas—like each page of his novels—bears witness to a life spent seeking beauty and truth in a rapidly changing world.

Bangdel's contributions extend beyond the visual arts. His three novels—*Muluk Bahira (Outside the Country)*, *Maitighar (The Maternal Home)*, and *Langadāko Sāthi (The Cripple's Friend)*—introduced a vigorous realism into Nepali literature, giving voice to the marginalized and redefining the moral center of modern Nepali fiction. As an art historian, publications such as *Early Sculptures of Nepal* (1982), *2500 Years of Nepalese Art* (1985), and *Stolen Images of Nepal* (1989) became foundational texts for South Asian art history and heritage preservation, galvanizing public awareness and policy attention to the trafficking of sacred art. His commitment to teaching and cultural diplomacy was equally significant—from a Fulbright appointment teaching Nepali art and culture at Denison University in Ohio (1968–69) to later leadership as Chancellor of the Royal Nepal Academy, where he championed artists, writers, and the stewardship of Nepal's cultural memory.

More than an artist, Bangdel was a bridge between eras—between tradition and modernity, the sacred and the secular, Nepal and the wider world. His legacy continues to inspire artists and writers, as well as scholars, curators, and cultural advocates across generations. Today, as Nepal reimagines its place in the global art landscape, Bangdel's vision remains urgent: to be modern need not mean to be rootless; art can be both universal and intimately local; and creativity, pursued with honesty and purpose, can help shape the destiny of a nation.

Early Life: Solitude, Loss, and the Seeds of Beauty (1919-1939)

Lain Singh Bangdel was born in 1919 in Darjeeling, India, into a modest Nepali immigrant family. His early years unfolded amid the Eastern Himalayas, where mist, silence, and nature became his first teachers. His father worked as a clerk at the Tukvar Tea Estate—earning little

but instilling discipline and humility. His mother, a gentle and nurturing presence, died when he was only eighteen months old, leaving an absence that would echo throughout his life. Raised by his grandmother in a small hillside home, he grew up in tenderness, simplicity, and solitude. The emotional undercurrents of love and loss from those years would later shape both the empathy of his writing and the inward quiet of his art.

The hills offered both hardship and an education. Morning mists rose from the terraced slopes, and by evening, Kangchenjunga was brushed in orange, rose, and gold. Festivals such as *Tihar* (*Dīpāwali*), *Daśain*, *Teej*, and *Nāga Pañcamī* wove image and ritual into daily life: rangoli spread across earthen floors, and protective figures of deities were painted at thresholds. As a child, he was asked to decorate walls with deities and flowers; villagers noted the certainty of his line and the harmony of his colors. An elderly priest, watching him work, offered

a matter-of-fact blessing. The boy would become “a great artist of the world.” Small school prizes followed—not for precocity alone, but for the seriousness with which he treated making as a form of care.

Economic hardship interrupted his schooling for six years—his older brother was chosen for formal study while he remained at home. Those unstructured years became what he later described as his “first education from nature.” Alone in the forests and tea gardens of Darjeeling, he absorbed shifting light, seasonal rhythms, and the luminous calm of distant peaks. The pink glow of dawn over Kangchenjunga, the wind through pines, the silhouettes of terraced hills imprinted themselves upon his imagination. He would later reflect that these encounters taught him more than any classroom could: a sense of harmony, impermanence, and transcendence that would guide his creative vision.

When he finally returned to school, his determination was extraordinary. He walked nearly three hours each day to attend classes, studying along the way. A compassionate teacher recognized his aptitude and encouraged him to draw, introducing the expressive possibilities of line and shadow. Around the same time, the sudden death of a brilliant classmate—his closest friend—deepened his awareness of fragility and loss. This early reckoning with impermanence gave his art and literature a distinctive intensity. Beauty was never separate from sorrow, and each image carried a meditation on transience.

Faculty soon saw what persistence could do. The headmaster, struck by the quality of his drawings, unlocked the school’s scant cache of brushes and pigment and let him use a small room near the office as a makeshift studio during recess. Paintings of village life and mountains appeared in corridors, traveled to district competitions, and returned with

certificates. Alongside drawing he found writing as a second practice. By ninth grade he was publishing short essays and stories in Hindi and English in local magazines—an unusual accomplishment for a student of his means. The two disciplines did not compete; they taught one habit in two grammars, letting form carry feeling with economy.

Despite financial and social barriers, he excelled in studies and in the arts, drawing, music, and theater. He performed in school plays, painted sets, and wrote poems, an early synthesis of image, narrative, and performance. Just before his final examinations, tragedy struck again. Lain’s grandmother, his guardian and moral compass, passed away. Although grieving deeply, he completed his exams with distinction, transforming pain into perseverance, a trait that would sustain him through later struggles.

At a moment when peers sensibly pursued medicine, engineering, or government service, he asked permission for a different path. His father urged medicine; the son's insistence was steady rather than dramatic. With reluctant support from the family—and in recognition of his record—he applied to the Government College of Art and Craft in Calcutta. One of only six students from Darjeeling to receive a government scholarship, he left for Calcutta in 1939 with money scarce but resolve intact. The journey was not only toward a career; it set the course that would connect the hills of his childhood to the studios of Paris and, eventually, to the heart of Nepal's artistic awakening.

Calcutta and the Literary Awakening (1939-1951)

In 1939, Lain Singh Bangdel arrived in Calcutta—a city alive with artistic energy, political ferment, and global ideas.

Enrolling at the Government College of Arts and Crafts marked both a personal and cultural awakening for the young man from Darjeeling. Then one of South Asia's great intellectual centers, Calcutta was a place where debates on art, literature, and independence intertwined; here, Bangdel's journey from gifted provincial student to visionary modern artist truly began.

His student years coincided with World War II, the mounting struggle for Indian independence, and the devastation of the 1943 Bengal Famine. Life was difficult. Money was scarce. At one point he lost his stipend due to a clerical error and an unfounded accusation. Yet his resolve never wavered. He painted by lamplight at night, often skipping meals to pay for supplies, and graduated in 1945 with top honors. Among the formative influences around him was Zainul Abedin—later hailed as the father of Bangladeshi modernism—whose famine drawings and socially engaged practice strengthened

Bangdel's conviction that art must not only please the eye but also stir the conscience. In classrooms and studios he absorbed the tensions among academic realism, the lyricism of the Bengal School, and emerging modernist experiment, learning to synthesize rather than merely inherit styles.

After graduation, Bangdel entered the commercial world of advertising at the British firm D. J. Keymer, where he shared a desk with another young visionary, Satyajit Ray. The two forged an enduring friendship grounded in humanist aesthetics and disciplined craft. They discussed cinema, music, and design late into the night, sketching ideas that bridged East and West, tradition and innovation. Ray would go on to transform world cinema; Bangdel would redefine modern Nepali art. Both drew from those Calcutta years a belief that art's ethical purpose was rooted in truth, emotion, and clarity of form (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Bangdel with Satyajit Ray, 1986



Amid the creative ferment of postwar Calcutta, Bangdel also found his literary voice. Between 1949 and 1951 he wrote three groundbreaking Nepali novels—*Muluk Bahira* (*Outside the Country*), *Maitighar* (*The Maternal Home*), and *Langadāko Sāthi* (*The Cripple's Friend*)—that reshaped Nepali fiction. In a literary landscape long shaped by romantic idealism, these works introduced realism, psychological nuance, and social critique. His characters—migrant workers, urban dreamers, moral outsiders—embodied the dislocations of modern life. Written in exile, the novels gave language to those suspended between worlds and secured his lasting literary stature.

In 1950, he founded *Prabhat*, the first Nepali literary magazine published from India. It became a beacon for diaspora writers and a forum for modern Nepali thought, signaling a confident new chapter for Nepali letters beyond national borders. Seventy-five years on, *Prabhat* remains a symbol of that intellectual flowering and cultural solidarity.

For Bangdel, literature and painting were never separate disciplines but twin expressions of a single creative impulse. His prose carried a painter's sensitivity to light, texture, and mood, while his canvases pursued the psychological depth of the novelist. By the early 1950s, however, Calcutta's commercial art world felt limiting. To reach the epicenter of global modernism, he needed to get to Europe—and the obstacle was cost. In the early years of independent India, industrial sponsors ran national art and design competitions across multiple categories. Seeing a narrow path, he entered widely—posters, sketches,

conceptual designs—and, through rigor and audacity, won first prize in every category he attempted. The cumulative awards funded the journey he had long envisioned. The next chapter would begin in Europe, where his artistic identity would be reborn.

London and Paris: the Making of a Modernist (1952-1961)

In the early 1950s, Lain Singh Bangdel embarked on one of the most transformative journeys of his life. Leaving the familiar streets of Calcutta and his growing literary reputation, he set out for Europe with little money but unshakable resolve. By late 1951 he was in London, spending long hours in the National Gallery and the Tate, studying the masters brushstroke by brushstroke. There he reconnected with his future wife, Manu Thapa, whose steadfast emotional and financial support sustained him through the most precarious years of

Figure 2. Newly Wed Couple, 1953



Paris, pulsing with postwar creativity and existential debate, demanded that he unlearn academic habit and paint from the interior. At the École des Beaux-Arts—

Figure 3. *Artist's Wife*, 1955
Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002)
Oil on Canvas, 51 x 43 cm



creating works such as *Autumn in Paris* and *Artist's Wife*, alongside paintings related to the *Muna-Madan* theme (Figure

Figure 4. *Flute Player*, 1953
Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002)
Oil on board, 99 x 51 cm

3). He acknowledged the painters he revered—Cézanne’s structure, Gauguin’s contour, Modigliani’s elongation, Van Gogh’s insistence—but treated influence as apprenticeship to be shed in search of a voice both modern and his own.

The early Paris canvases retained figuration yet turned inward. Works such as *The Flute Player*, *Grass Cutter*, and *Tibetan Woman* convey stillness, solitude, and quiet dignity. Rendered in tempered browns, crimsons, and blues, solitary figures appear suspended

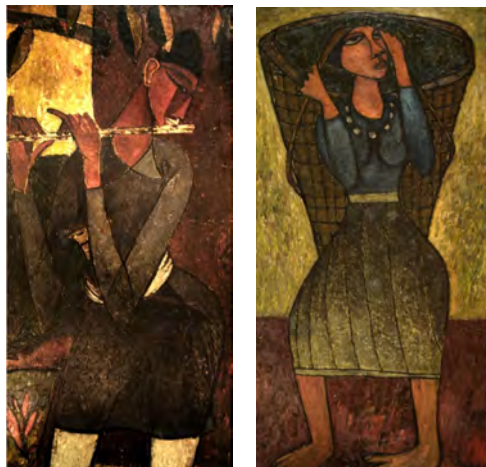


Figure 5. *Grass Cutter*, 1954
Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002)
Oil on board, 99 x 51 cm

between memory and dream, exile and belonging (Figures 4 and 5). The Himalayas linger in the palette—their mists and shadows transposed into color and form—so that even Paris paintings carry a mountain weather. Critics noted the psychological depth of these works, describing them as “portraits of silence.”

Recognition followed. In 1954, his first major European exhibition in Stuttgart drew attention for originality and sensitivity; further shows in Paris and London confirmed his presence within a global modernist conversation. “To paint,” he wrote in his notes, “is to seek truth—not the truth of appearances, but the truth of feeling.” Encounters in Paris reinforced this arc. In 1955 he briefly met Picasso and Braque, meetings that affirmed the primacy of work over posture. *Famine of Bengal* (1956–59)—a woman cradling a dying child—became his first sustained oil of major ambition. Its blue-green tonality, recalling Picasso’s Blue Period, deepens the atmosphere of grief and memorializes what he had witnessed

in Calcutta in 1942. Other oils—*Old Man and Stupa*, *Reflections of Old Age*, *Curiosity*—push toward abstraction: pared backgrounds, near-monochromes, figures reduced to essentials so that minimal means carry maximal weight. Critics later said these canvases felt “filled with distance,” as if the figures remembered another landscape even while present to this one.

By the end of the decade his evolution reached a decisive turn. Having pushed figuration to its expressive limits, he embraced abstraction—not as rejection but as revelation. Brief experiments with Cubist idioms (mainly still lifes) proved too mechanical for his ear; he destroyed much of that work. The move into abstraction gathered pace as he sought to let subject be present as atmosphere rather than depiction. Early abstractions retain faint horizons—dark fields relieved by small flares of white—before opening into more luminous balances. As life steadied—periods reunited with Manu in

London, occasional work with a London art group—his palette brightened: saffrons, ochres, pale whites, darker shapes anchoring depth and motion. The canvases, modest in scale, became deliberately constructed color-forms in poised equilibrium, suggesting nature without describing it: shimmer, weather, the residue of memory. These luminous paintings—at once economical and transcendent—would later be described as a Himalayan modernism, a language of pure form that spoke universally while retaining the soul of the mountains.

By 1961, Bangdel had completed his Paris metamorphosis. He emerged with a visual idiom modern in expression and Nepali in essence. That same year an invitation arrived that would alter the course of his life—and, in time, the trajectory of Nepali art: a summons from King Mahendra and Prime Minister B. P. Koirala to visit Nepal for the first time and help shape its artistic and cultural future.

A Cultural Homecoming: Nepal's Modern Art Pioneer (1961-1969)

When Lain Singh Bangdel arrived in Kathmandu in 1961, it was not as a returning expatriate but as a cultural emissary. Remarkably, it was his first time setting foot in the country of his ancestry—a homeland long imagined but never seen. Invited by King Mahendra and Prime Minister B. P. Koirala, he entered Nepal at a moment of transition, as the nation emerged from more than a century of isolation and began to reimagine itself as a modern state. His appointment to the Royal Nepal Academy—succeeding a seat once held by the great poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota—signaled an official recognition that art and culture were central to nation-building.

Nepal in the early 1960s was in creative flux. Sacred art and ritual craft still shaped its visual traditions, and the very concept of “modern art” had little

public currency. Painters largely worked within devotional frameworks; individual artistic expression and abstraction had not yet taken root. Into this landscape stepped a Paris-trained modernist fluent in the abstract language of color, emotion, and form. When Bangdel held his first exhibition at Tri-Chandra College in 1962, the response bordered on disbelief. His vibrant canvases—layered with shifting textures, symbolic hues, and unfamiliar compositions—defied easy categorization. For many viewers, it was a first encounter with non-representational art. For Bangdel, it marked the beginning of a dialogue between the timeless and the modern.

Through exhibitions, public lectures, and essays, Bangdel became a bridge across cultures and generations. He argued that modernism was not a Western import but a universal mode of seeing—fully capable of expressing Nepal's landscapes, myths, and spiritual sensibilities in a contemporary idiom. Paintings from this

period, often dominated by reds, ochres, and earthen browns, evoke the sacred geography of Nepal: mountain horizons, temple spires, village rhythms, and a felt cosmic energy rendered through abstraction. To be modern, he insisted, was not to reject tradition but to renew it through creative freedom.

As a mentor, he nurtured Nepal's first generation of modern artists, many of whom had never met a professional painter of international standing. In the absence of art schools or formal programs, his modest Kathmandu studio functioned as an informal academy. Young painters gathered to watch him work, discuss ideas, and absorb a discipline grounded in humility, rigor, and artistic integrity. He shared not only technique but a philosophy: clarity of form must be matched by clarity of conscience.

In 1963, through his vision and leadership, the Nepal Art Council was established—creating, for the first time, a national platform for exhibitions, dialogue, and cultural exchange. Dedicated to advancing Nepali modern art at home and abroad, the Council quickly became a vital institution and continues to shape the country's artistic landscape. Its endurance into the present is among his clearest legacies: a venue where modern art could be seen, debated, and learned—and from which Nepali art could speak to the world.

That same year brought an intimate transformation: the birth of his daughter, Dina. Raised among canvases and the scent of oil paint, her childhood contrasted sharply with her father's austerity (Figure 6). The tenderness of fatherhood softened his *Mother and Child* motif into images of shelter and repose (Figure 7). As an adult, Professor Dina Bangdel became a leading scholar and curator of Himalayan and South Asian

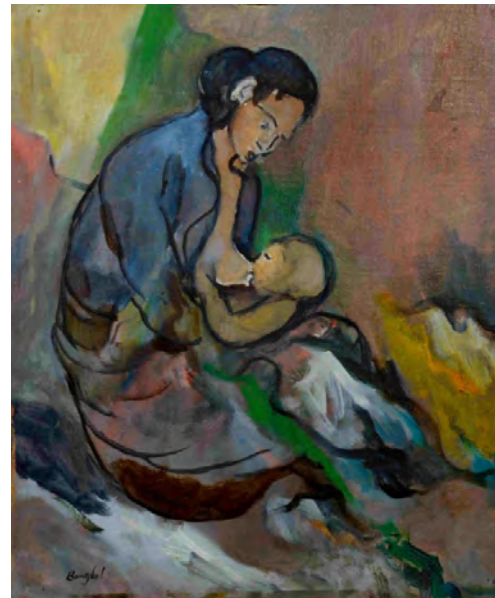
Figure 6. Lain, Manu and Dina, 1964



art—advancing the very conversations her father had opened and confirming his conviction that creative practice and scholarship are two instruments of the same cultural work.

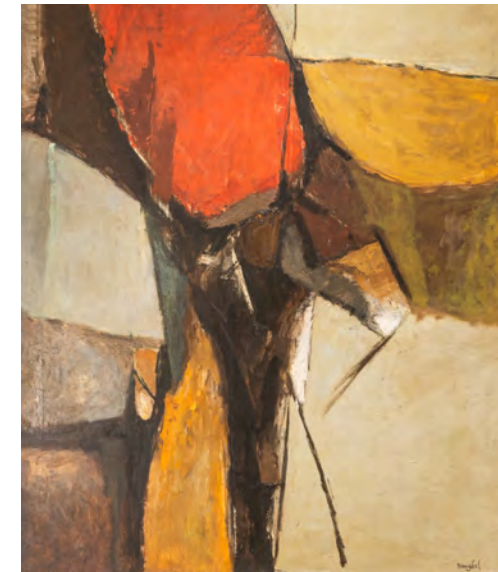
Bangdel's vision also extended to preservation. Disturbed by the growing theft of sacred art from temples and monasteries, he publicly warned as early as the mid-1960s that Nepal's visual memory was at risk. This advocacy would culminate in his landmark publication *Stolen Images of Nepal* (1989), which helped awaken national and international awareness about the trafficking of Nepali artifacts.

Figure 7. *Mother and Child*, 1964
Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002)
Oil on canvas, 53 x 43 cm



Between 1968 and 1969, as a Fulbright Faculty member at Denison University in Ohio, Bangdel taught Nepali art and culture, introducing students to the artistic and spiritual heritage of the Himalayas. In 1969 he also presented solo exhibitions at Denison (Ohio) and in Washington, D.C., extending his dialogue with American audiences beyond the classroom (Figure 8). He subsequently lectured at Harvard

Figure 8. *America*, 1968
Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002)
Oil on canvas, 130 x 110 cm



University, presenting Nepal's traditions within a broader South Asian and global frame. During this period he visited major museum collections across the United States and was dismayed to find Nepali sculptures and artifacts displayed without clear provenance. These encounters deepened his resolve to document and safeguard Nepal's visual heritage before it could be lost to neglect, misattribution, or exploitation.

Within less than a decade, Bangdel helped transform Nepal's cultural consciousness. He was not merely an artist visiting his ancestral land; he became its modern cultural architect. Through his example, Nepal began to perceive itself as both ancient and modern—its creativity no longer confined to temples and rituals, but alive in the language of color, abstraction, and imagination.

Scholar, Leader, and Cultural Conscience (1970-1989)

By the 1970s, Lain Singh Bangdel stood as Nepal's foremost modern artist, yet his influence extended far beyond the studio. Having already redefined the visual arts, he emerged as the nation's leading cultural leader, scholar, and moral conscience. His vocation was no longer confined to painting; he had become a steward of Nepal's artistic imagination and a voice for its cultural integrity.

In 1974, Bangdel was appointed Vice Chancellor of the Royal Nepal Academy, and in 1979 he became its Chancellor—the first visual artist to lead Nepal’s most prestigious cultural institution. His appointment signaled a shift in national priorities, elevating the visual arts alongside literature, music, and theater. Under his leadership, the Academy revived its public mission through exhibitions, seminars, and lectures that convened artists, writers, and thinkers in sustained dialogue. For Bangdel, art was never an isolated pursuit; it was a mirror of society and a measure of its moral and intellectual health.

He advanced a broader understanding of the artist’s role—not merely as a maker of objects, but as a philosopher and guide. “Our artists and writers,” he often said, “must be free to think beyond tradition, but still remain rooted in it.” This conviction shaped his decade of leadership as the Academy became a crucible for creativity and critique.

He encouraged bold experimentation grounded in Nepal’s spiritual and aesthetic lineages and advocated regional outreach—traveling exhibitions and talks that carried contemporary art discourse beyond Kathmandu to provincial towns and college campuses.

During these same years, Bangdel distinguished himself as one of South Asia’s leading art historians and cultural preservationists. The theft of sacred sculptures from temples and monasteries had reached alarming proportions, and he understood what was being lost: not only objects, but memory. He set out to document and defend this endangered heritage. His trilogy—*Early Sculptures of Nepal* (1982), *2,500 Years of Nepalese Art* (1985), and *Stolen Images of Nepal* (1989)—set new benchmarks of scholarship and conscience. Combining meticulous research with moral urgency, *Stolen Images of Nepal* exposed global trafficking networks and galvanized preservation efforts. He urged

Figure 9. *Mountain and Valley*, 1973
Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002)
Oil on canvas, 95 x 155 cm

inventories, community vigilance, and photographic records, partnering with monks, priests, and local custodians to document objects in situ so that visual memory would persist even when physical custody failed. These books doubled as teaching tools, shaping a generation of scholars and conservators.

Despite administrative and scholarly demands, Bangdel never relinquished painting. His mature works—such as *Song of the Himalayas* and *Mountain and Valley*—sustain a luminous serenity, balancing modern abstraction with



meditative depth (Figure 9). In these canvases, the boundaries between art and spirituality dissolve; the Himalayas

appear not only as landscapes but as symbols of inner silence and transcendence. He guarded studio hours—often at dawn—so that institutional duty would not eclipse the vocation that animated it.

Recognition followed from around the world. France appointed him Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres; Britain named him Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order; Italy and Spain conferred high civil honors; and Nepal awarded him the *Gorkha Dakshin Bahu*. These accolades acknowledged not only his creative achievement but also his role as a cultural ambassador bridging continents and generations. At home and abroad, his lectures and essays—delivered in Nepali and English—framed modernism as both porous and rooted, a language capacious enough to hold Nepal’s sacred past and its contemporary aspirations.

By the close of his second term as Chancellor in 1989—one of only two figures in Academy history to serve back-to-back terms, alongside poet Kedar Man Vyathit—Bangdel had altered Nepal’s cultural landscape. He elevated the visual arts to national prominence, mentored a generation, and laid practical groundwork for heritage preservation that endures. What began decades earlier as a vow under Himalayan light had become a program: modernism with memory; scholarship with conscience; institution-building as public service. More than painter or scholar, he had become Nepal’s cultural conscience—leaving the country not only with images that endure, but with institutions and standards by which to care for them.

Return to the Canvas and Enduring Legacy (1989-2002)

After completing his tenure as Chancellor of the Royal Nepal Academy in 1989,

Lain Singh Bangdel returned to the quiet discipline of painting with renewed freedom and clarity. Free of administrative duty, he entered one of the most contemplative phases of his life. His late canvases—luminous, meditative, and suffused with silence—distill a lifetime into color and light, evoking Nepal’s sacred landscape: drifting Himalayan mists, the whisper of prayer flags, the tranquil rhythm of mountain dawns. “At last,” he said, “I am free to paint for myself again.” His *Self-Portrait* registers that release—an image of calm joy at reclaiming uninterrupted studio time (Figure 10).

This final creative chapter was defined by reflection and revelation. After decades at the crossroads of art, literature, and cultural leadership, he sought to express what lay beyond representation—the ineffable pulse of being itself. Works such as *Freedom* and *Turmoils* seem less painted than breathed into existence, their translucent layers merging into radiant abstraction. These are not depictions of nature but meditations upon it—inner landscapes born of solitude,

Figure 10. *Self Portrait*, 1990
Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002)
Oil on canvas, 107 x 91 cm



devotion, and transcendence. Through them, Bangdel moved closer to what he once described as “the truth of feeling,” a truth words could never fully contain.

Throughout his life he consciously distanced himself from partisan politics, believing that art should illuminate the human condition rather than serve ideology. While deeply patriotic, he expressed love for Nepal through

beauty, introspection, and timeless themes. Among the few works that allude to national sentiment, *Mother Nepal* stands apart—a poignant metaphor for the country’s pain and perseverance.

By the early 1990s, as Nepal was swept by the pro-democracy movement, the urgency of the moment stirred him to respond as he knew best—through painting. Retreating into his studio for several weeks, he created the *Democracy Series* (1991), a cycle of five or six canvases in abstract and semi-abstract modes. Color and movement replace slogans; turbulence, fragmentation, and sudden flares of light embody the tension and hope of a nation in transition. The series endures as one of his most emotionally charged bodies of work—not protest but conscience—transforming political upheaval into meditations on struggle, resilience, and renewal.

Figure 11. Bangdel with his students, 1993

Parallel to this late flowering was a deep commitment to mentorship. From 1990 until his passing in 2002, he guided a younger generation of Nepali artists seeking both technical mastery and philosophical grounding (Figure 11). With few formal institutions to rely on,



many found in Bangdel a mentor whose wisdom bridged East and West, form and spirit. His studio became a sanctuary of dialogue and generosity—alive with conversation, quiet demonstrations, and the scent of oil paint. He shared materials, offered frank critiques, and encouraged experiment without seeking credit or compensation. “We could never have afforded to study in Paris,” one student

recalled, “but Bangdel sir brought Paris to Kathmandu for us.” Among those shaped by his example was Jeevan Rajopadhyay, whose work carries forward Bangdel’s fusion of emotional depth and modernist vision.

During these years he also spent extended periods in Columbus, Ohio, with his daughter, Professor Dina Bangdel, and son-in-law, Dr. Bibhakar Sunder Shakya. Surrounded by family, he found peace—moments of quiet reflection amid affection and laughter. He revisited the arc of his journey: from the tea gardens of Darjeeling to the ateliers of Paris, from the solitude of exile to his role as Nepal’s cultural architect. His late works, painted in gratitude and stillness, radiate the serenity of an artist who had fulfilled his purpose. In 1995 his first grandson, Deven, was born. During a 1998 visit, Bangdel delighted in the child’s company, reliving in play a tenderness his own childhood had denied (Figure 12). His second grandson, Neal, arrived in

Figure 12. Family Photo in Columbus, OH, 1998




2000; Dina brought the baby to Nepal in 2001 for a months-long stay with Lain and Manu—remembered by the family as one of his life’s gentlest chapters.

By the time of his passing in 2002, Bangdel had come to embody the creative conscience of Nepal. Once viewed as a provocateur introducing foreign aesthetics, he was now revered as a national sage—a bridge between eras, cultures, and generations. His legacy continued through his daughter, the late Professor Dina Bangdel, whose scholarly brilliance and curatorial vision extended his work into new global dialogues on South Asian art. Together they represent a rare continuum of creativity and

conviction—a father and daughter united by art and truth.

He often described painting and writing as twin practices. “My writing and my painting,” he said, “were never separate. They came from the same well of truth and empathy.” Elsewhere: “I never saw myself as just a painter or just a writer. I was a seeker—a seeker of truth through form.” Few figures in Nepali cultural history embodied that unity more completely. His canvases carry the conscience of a scholar; his scholarship bears the contemplative density of an artist attentive to memory, ritual, and time.

Today, Bangdel’s paintings reside in major collections across the world, including the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (Japan), the Newark Museum of Art (New Jersey), the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (Oregon), the United Nations Headquarters (New York), the National Art Museum of Nepal, the Nepal Art



Council, the Bhaktapur City Museum, the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (New Delhi), and the Embassy of Nepal in Washington, D.C. Their presence affirms his rightful place within the global canon of modernism.

What, finally, did he leave? Paintings—fields where color becomes breath and form becomes prayer. Books that changed how Nepal’s heritage is seen and defended. Institutions and habits of mind that made modern art legible to a public. “As artists,” Bangdel once said, “we must be fearless, but stay rooted. The world will listen if you speak your truth.” He is remembered not only as the father of modern Nepali art but as a visionary who believed in the power of creativity to elevate, to connect, and to heal. His legacy endures in every brushstroke that seeks light—in every artist who dares to dream beyond borders.

About the Author

Dr. Bibhakar S. Shakya is a Ph.D. economist, cultural advocate, and film producer based in Richmond, Virginia, and Kathmandu, Nepal. After three decades in international development—specializing in energy economics, environmental policy, and sustainable growth—he redirected his life’s work following the passing of his wife, Professor Dina Bangdel, the distinguished art historian and curator of Himalayan and South Asian art. Since then, he has become a principal steward of Sir Lain Singh Bangdel’s legacy: organizing major exhibitions across the United States, Europe, and Asia; writing catalog essays; and helping to bring Bangdel’s work into leading public collections and international art fairs. As a filmmaker, he extends this mission through works such as Abhinna, Have You Seen My Gods?, and Shambhala, alongside ongoing efforts to archive Bangdel’s oeuvre and build a Digital Art Library. Across these initiatives, he seeks to build bridges between generations and geographies, treating creativity as both civic responsibility and human bond—rooted in Nepal, resonant worldwide.

BANGDEL AND THE NEPAL ART COUNCIL: BUILDING A HOME FOR MODERN ART

Swosti Rajbhandari Kayastha

Working as a curator and public relations officer at the Nepal Art Council for the past decade has allowed me to reflect deeply on the institution's history and on the individuals who imagined it into being. The Council was founded in 1963, barely a decade after Nepal emerged from a century of political isolation. It was a bold undertaking: to create an independent platform where artists and audiences could engage with new ideas in art at a moment when the country itself was opening to the world. At the heart of that vision was one of Nepal's most influential modern artists and cultural leaders, Lain Singh Bangdel.

Bangdel's name is often evoked as the pioneer of modern art in Nepal. Yet to understand his legacy fully, we must look beyond his individual canvases to the institutions he helped build and the artistic transformations he set in motion. His first solo exhibition in Kathmandu, held in 1962 at Saraswati Sadan, Tri-Chandra College, is now regarded as

a milestone in Nepal's art history. In a country still adjusting to its new openness, this one-week show of sixty-five paintings introduced viewers to a kind of work they had never encountered before.

The exhibition brought together portraits of leading Nepali writers and intellectuals, landscapes, and the emotionally charged *Muna-Madan* series inspired by Laxmi Prasad Devkota's beloved epic poem. Some works retained recognizable figures and places, but others pushed toward abstraction, using bold color and expressive brushwork. Many viewers did not quite know how to "read" these paintings, yet they felt their force. Artists of the younger generation recall the shock of seeing Bangdel's work: it was as if modern art had arrived in Kathmandu overnight.

This breakthrough drew on years of training and experimentation abroad. Before returning to Nepal, Bangdel had

spent formative years in Kolkata, London, and Paris. In Kolkata he studied at what is now the Government College of Arts and Crafts, learning careful draftsmanship and absorbing a hybrid “Company style” that blended South Asian and European pictorial conventions. In London and then Paris, he encountered the works of Cézanne, Braque, Picasso, Modigliani, and many others. He studied at the École des Beaux-Arts and moved in circles of Indian and South Asian artists who were reimagining modern art for newly independent societies.

Out of these experiences, Bangdel developed a personal language that combined European modernist techniques with the emotional, geographic, and cultural realities of his own life. When he returned to Nepal in the early 1960s, he did not simply import a foreign modernism; he translated what he had learned into a visual idiom rooted in the Himalayas, in Nepali literature, and in the lived experiences of ordinary

people. The 1962 exhibition marked the public beginning of that translation.

But Bangdel also understood that a single exhibition, no matter how groundbreaking, was not enough. Nepal needed institutions—spaces that could host regular exhibitions, foster critical dialogue, and expose artists and audiences to both local and international art. It was this conviction that led him, together with like-minded cultural and governmental figures, to help establish the Nepal Art Council in 1963.

From the outset, the Council was conceived as a bridge between Nepal and the wider world of art. Bangdel served as its Founding Secretary, a position he held for nearly forty years. This was not a ceremonial role: it involved day-to-day responsibility and a sustained commitment to shaping the Council’s mission and activities. His primary goal was to share with Nepali

Figure 1. Nepal Art Council, 1967

artists the insights he had gained from France, England, and other places he had lived and visited, and to create conditions in which future generations could experiment, learn, and grow.

In its early years, the Council operated with modest means but ambitious vision. It was first housed in a ground-floor room on the south side of Babar Mahal, then the residence of General Mrigendra (Figure 1). Without a permanent gallery, the Council organized exhibitions off-site. In



late 1963 it mounted a major exhibition at the Saraswati Sadan complex that featured reproductions of masterpieces by Italian artists such as Michelangelo,

Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, and Panini. At a time when international travel, art books, and color catalogues were rare in Nepal, these reproductions proved revelatory.

The strategy was clear: to bring the greatest artworks from the world’s great museums to Nepal through posters, prints, and photographic reproductions acquired from institutions and embassies abroad. Long before the internet or even widespread television, these images became vital tools for learning. They allowed students, artists, and curious visitors to study Western art practices at close range, seeing how composition, light, and color were handled in works across centuries and continents. This quiet yet radical gesture helped lay the foundations for a contemporary art scene that saw itself as part of a global conversation.

Figure 2. Bangdel's Retrospective Exhibition at NAC, 1991

Figure 3. Bangdel and the Nepal Art Council, 1995

Bangdel was also closely involved in shaping the Council's permanent gallery. Drawing on his visits to museums in Europe and the United States, he worked with architect and Council executive board member Narendra Pradhan to design a two-story building crowned with a small pagoda-like structure opening onto the terrace. Within the constraints of a limited budget, they aimed for a flexible, light-filled space that could accommodate large paintings and evolving exhibition needs. Pradhan later noted that while he prepared the architectural plans, it was Bangdel who defined the core idea of the gallery: emphasizing natural light managed through high clerestory windows, allowing all internal walls to be used for hanging art.

The fully finished gallery officially opened in April 1991 with a landmark event: Bangdel's own retrospective, inaugurated by Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai (Figure 2). That exhibition



brought together some 250 paintings spanning fifty years, from student works to mature abstractions. Portraits, landscapes, figurative compositions, and abstract Himalayan vistas were displayed side by side, allowing viewers to trace the evolution of an artist who had moved fluently between styles while remaining grounded in a deep emotional and cultural connection to Nepal. For many younger artists, the retrospective was a revelation: it demonstrated the range a modern painter could achieve and confirmed that the Nepal Art Council had become a true home for modern and contemporary art.

Bangdel's commitment to the Council did not waver, even during moments of political upheaval. During the 1990 People's Movement (Jana Andolan), some artists protested his dual leadership roles—as Chairman of the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts and Secretary of the Nepal Art Council—and called for his resignation. It was a painful episode that disrupted the Council's activities and reflected broader tensions in the country. Yet Bangdel stood firm, defended the Council's mission, and continued its work. Over time, the controversy subsided, and the artists who had opposed him later apologized. He remained Secretary of the Council until his passing in 2002, marking four decades of service (Figure 3).



Parallel to his work with the Nepal Art Council, Bangdel played major roles in other cultural institutions. Appointed to the Royal Nepal Academy in 1961, he later served as its Vice Chancellor (1974) and Chancellor (1979-1989). Under King Birendra's patronage, the Nepal Association of Fine Art was formed within the Academy, leading to the creation of the Birendra Art Gallery, the first museum of contemporary Nepali art. Bangdel initially served as Treasurer and later as Chair of the gallery, further expanding the infrastructure for modern art in the country. In recognition of his contributions, he was appointed to the Raj Parishad (Royal Council) in 1998.

Equally significant were his contributions as a writer and cultural historian. Alarmed by the increasing theft and illicit export of sacred sculptures from the Kathmandu Valley, Bangdel dedicated decades to research and documentation. His books—*Early Sculptures of Nepal*, *Inventory of Stone Sculptures of Kathmandu Valley*,

Figure 4. Nepal Art Council today
Photo Credit: Nikesh Shrestha

and *Stolen Images of Nepal*—compiled visual and textual records of Nepal’s sculptural heritage at a critical moment. By photographing objects *in situ* and tracking those that had disappeared, he provided vital evidence for scholars, curators, and legal efforts to repatriate stolen works. These publications remain foundational resources for anyone concerned with Nepal’s tangible heritage and the ethics of collecting.

Perhaps the most enduring aspect of Bangdel’s legacy, however, lies in the lives and practices of the artists he mentored. Through formal and informal teaching—whether in the Council galleries, in his Sanepa garden, or during outdoor painting sessions—he encouraged students to experiment with new techniques, media, and forms of abstraction. Many of these artists went on to form the Society of Modern Artists, organizing exhibitions and awards that continue to keep his spirit of inquiry alive. They remember him not only as a master

painter but as a gentle, generous guide who modeled how to be both an artist and a responsible cultural citizen.

Today, as we reflect on Bangdel’s life through the lens of *Transformations: Lain Singh Bangdel, Art, Nepal*, his role in shaping the Nepal Art Council and related institutions appears inseparable from his achievements on canvas. He did not treat art as an isolated, personal pursuit. For him, art was a catalyst for



education, international exchange, and cultural preservation. He transformed the visual language of Nepal through

his paintings—but he also transformed the very conditions in which art could be made, seen, and debated (Figure 4).

As a curator at the Nepal Art Council, I continue to feel the impact of his vision in our galleries every day. The light that filters through the high windows, the flexible walls that host successive

generations of artists, the very existence of a public, non-commercial space for art in the heart of Kathmandu—all bear the imprint of his imagination and perseverance. In this sense, the story of Bangdel and the Council is not only about the past; it is an ongoing invitation to artists, scholars, and audiences to keep transforming how we see Nepal, and how Nepal sees the world.

About the Author

Swosti Rajbhandari Kayastha is a scholar of Nepali cultural heritage and an Executive Board Member of Patan Museum. She holds MAs in Nepalese History, Culture, and Archaeology from Tribhuvan University and in Museum and Gallery Practice from University College London. Currently Curator at the Nepal Art Council, she has organized and curated numerous exhibitions in Nepal and abroad, and serves as a consultant for museum concept development. She also teaches museum studies, Nepali art and culture, and iconography at various institutions. A Fulbright Visiting Scholar (2024–25) affiliated with the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, she researched Nepali diaspora artists in the Bay Area and beyond, culminating in exhibitions at the California Institute of Integral Studies, the Piedmont Center for the Arts, and the Aurora Public Library in Colorado. Her articles and research on Nepali art and culture have appeared in ICOM publications and other respected national and international outlets.

LAIN SINGH BANGDEL: THE FATHER OF MODERN ART PAINTS 'MOTHER NEPAL'

Sarah Magnatta

Though a fairly small painting, Lain Singh Bangdel's *Mother Nepal* packs quite a punch. The angular and abstracted figure dominating much of the paper is contorted in a manner not unlike those from the Picasso paintings that influenced the artist. The blue tones of the image likewise draw comparisons to Picasso, but the title points to a subject quite specific to Bangdel's life and experiences. Bangdel, now known as the "Father of Modern Art" in Nepal, created a work that embodied his unique method of incorporating influential imagery, his love for Nepal, and his concern for his country, all in a small but transformative painting.

Born in Darjeeling, India, in 1919, Bangdel spent the first four decades of his life outside of his ancestral homeland of Nepal. He moved to Kolkata in 1939, attending the Government College of Art and Craft before moving to Paris in 1952, where he studied at l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts and encountered works by Cezanne, van

Gogh, Pissarro, Picasso, and Modigliani¹. He was greatly influenced by the planar forms of Cubism and the colors of Impressionism, and later by the painterly marks of Abstract Expressionism. While in Europe, he met several South Asian artists including S.H. Raza, Francis Newton Souza, and Tyeb Mehta and Akbar Padamsee—artists who often centered Indian nationalism in their work and are recognized as the creators of modern Indian painting². While these myriad influences surrounding Bangdel can be found in the color, form, and social commentary of the artist's work, he gradually developed his own individual style, synthesizing these components into a unique reflection of Nepali modernism. Scholar Owen Duffy notes "Bangdel did not perceive the duality of being at once modern and Nepali as a contradiction. Rather, these elements of his practice emerged in parallel and concert with one another and manifested in his work, sometimes separately, sometimes intimately bound."³ Recognizing the artist's ability to present this thoroughly

Figure 1. *Mother Nepal*, 1979
Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002)
Gouache, 50 x 37 inches

Figure 2. *Mother Nepal*, 1953
Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002)
Gouache, 51 x 38 inches

Figure 3. *Mother Nepal*, 1990
Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002)
Oil on canvas, 81 x 64 inches

Nepali aesthetic, Nepal's King Mahendra invited Bangdel to Kathmandu in 1961—the first time the artist had seen his homeland, though he had dreamed of Nepal for many years prior. The artist's daughter, scholar Dina Bangdel, wrote of this return to Nepal and the following year's subsequent exhibition: "Modern art was now on its feet in Nepal. From then onwards, Nepalese artists could pursue the avant-garde and be accepted as such by society. In the history of modern art in Nepal, this was the turning point."⁴

Mother Nepal (Figure 1), completed in 1979, marked the end of two decades in Bangdel's homeland. The figure at the center of the paper appears to be seated, though her angular posture does not conform to a realistic body at rest. Rather, we might interpret the shadows on the right side of the body beneath her torso as indicative of a seated posture. Her legs are parallel to her arm, their flesh-tones standing out against the vivid blue garment and the more muted blue and purple background. Her arm and



hand reach up toward her head which is bent in an acute and unnatural angle—this appears to be a figure in anguish. Bangdel began the *Mother Nepal* series while in Europe, ultimately creating five versions of the painting between 1953 and 1990. The earliest version (Figure 2) shows a figure in a similar posture with head in hand, though the body is not



quite bent to the extreme angles of the 1979 painting. The 1990 version (Figure 3) no longer shows Mother Nepal with her arm or hand visible; rather, Bangdel has abstracted the body even further, as the top half of the figure becomes a series of thick brush strokes mirroring the background of various colored marks. His use of oil paint (instead of the water-based gouache used in the 1979 version)



allowed for such impressionistic marks, though the continuity of the enigmatic figure remains throughout the series, regardless of changing materialities and scale. Bangdel's ongoing return to the topic shows an artist intrigued by the ability of an anthropomorphized figure to stand as a symbol of a nation. Bangdel's Nepal, always depicted as a woman with a bent and covered head, is a complicated place. The paintings

Figure 4. *Bharat Mata*, 1905
Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951)
Gouache, 26.6 x 15.2 cm
(Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata)

embody these complications within various components: the blue tones and contorted figures reflect Picasso's Blue Period works, for example, but they also nod to the difficult challenges facing Nepal at various times, as noted by scholars Don Messerschmidt and Dina Bangdel: "The *Mother Nepal* paintings show a dejected female figure symbolizing Nepal, sitting with her head weighed down by the burdens of poverty and misery."⁵

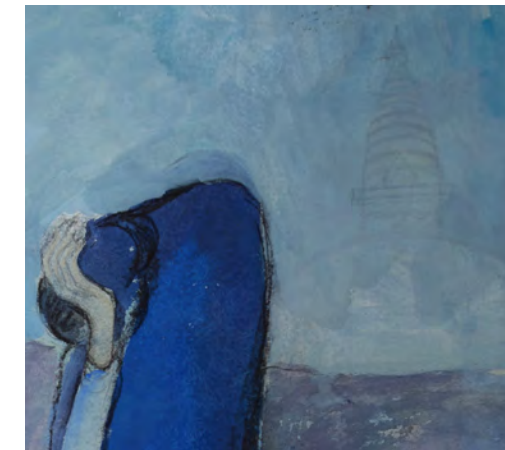
Bangdel often noted that his artwork was not political, saying "Art and politics don't mix."⁶ But I argue that his chosen title *makes* it political. The title does more than nod to Nepal, it presents the country in a manner similar to Bengali artist Abanindranath Tagore's painted *Bharat Mata* ("Mother India," 1905, Figure 4) from decades prior. Tagore's infamous painting was instrumental in highlighting the desire for communities around India to unite against British colonialism and celebrate India's unity. At the same time, the image—a goddess figure with



four arms dressed in typical Bengali clothing—highlighted Tagore's Bengali pride, navigating the line between

Figure 5. *Mother Nepal* (detail), 1979
Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002)
Gouache on paper, 50 x 37 cm

local culture and necessary (at the time) nationalism. Because Nepal was never colonized, Bangdel's figure appears less as a unified fighter against outside forces and more as an introspective meditation on the country the artist so loved. Bangdel's was not an unbridled nationalism, however, but a deep care for Nepal that included concern for



impoverished communities and anger towards injustice. In 1979, student protests and widespread civil unrest led to the following year's referendum on the system of government. Created while on the brink of the implementation

Figure 6. Swayambhunath Stupa, Nepal

of a multi-party democracy, the face-covered *Mother Nepal* thus reflects this uncertainty.⁷

But a small, barely visible piece of architecture in the upper right corner—the historical Swayambhu stupa of Nepal (Figure 5)—transforms the painting from



one of consuming sadness and despair to an image containing a glimpse of hope. Just above a presumed horizon

Figure 7. *Famine of Bengal*, 1956-59
Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002)
Oil on canvas, 66 x 99 cm

line—indicated by a slightly lighter blue than the bluish-purple land below—the eyes of the future Buddha appear through hazy brushstrokes. Above these eyes, the gold rings marking the top of the stupa reach toward the edge of the paper. Swayambhu is a sacred space for Buddhist and Hindu practitioners alike; it is a visual manifestation of the many practices and ethnicities of Nepal coming together. Swayambhu (Figure 6) is an ancient site fully operating in the present and protected for the future by its UNESCO status. This small feature embodies a sense of peace and unification: the lasting evidence of a place with an extended history and hopeful future. And thus, the painting is transformed into a complex site of simultaneous emotions: sadness, concern, and hope. Curator Owen Duffy wrote about another Bangdel painting, *Moon Over Kathmandu* (1962), as an “image of quiet patriotism.” I argue that *Mother Nepal*, painted seventeen years after *Moon Over Kathmandu*, is similarly

complex: it is an image of nationalistic reflection and optimism.

This version of *Mother Nepal* embodies many of the same transformations found in other paintings exhibited in *Transformations: Lain Singh Bangdel, Art, Nepal*—the emotional



resonance found in the figures of the *Muna-Madan* series (based on the widely-known Nepali love poem, 1955-96); the cubist contortions apparent in *Abstract I and II* (1969); the references to specific Nepali scenes in *A Village Near Kathmandu* (1971) and *Kathmandu Valley* (1973); and the titular references to political events in *Struggle for Democracy I and II* (1991). A mother and child image, *Famine in Bengal* (1956-59,

Figure 7), contains similarly contorted figures, asking us as viewers to grapple with the inherent tensions of the bodies in space. But there is personal in the universal, as Bibhakar Shakya notes yet another influence in the work: the loss of the artist's mother at a young age:

Having lost his mother at just eighteen months old, he was lovingly raised by his grandmother; yet he carried throughout his life a deep yearning for the maternal love he never fully knew. In interviews, he spoke movingly of this absence, saying that the most unconditional love in the world is a mother's love. He never tired of painting the Mother and Child theme, for he believed there were countless facets to a mother's love—so many that a lifetime would not be enough to capture them all on canvas.⁹

And so, *Mother Nepal* takes on the role of the mother of the artist, too. Perhaps the hidden face of the figure has less to do with turning away from sadness, and more to do with an artist grappling with the loss of his mother; an unknown motherly figure appears in the artist's body of work throughout his lifetime. Interpreting the multitude of possibilities in *Mother Nepal*, as with each of Bangdel's works, remains a timeless exercise.

Bangdel's influence has been widespread. He became the Head of the Faculty of the Fine Arts and Chancellor at the Royal Nepal Academy; he headed the Nepal Association of Fine Arts and co-founded the Nepal Art Council in 1963.¹⁰ And his work continues to inspire the next generation of Nepali artists.¹¹ The Kathmandu International Art Festival (KIAF)—started in 2009 as a “festival aimed to foster dialogue between Nepali and international artists”—continues as the Kathmandu Triennale, having rebranded in 2017.¹² The Takpa Gallery—site of a 2024 exhibition of Bangdel's work—

Figure 8. *Self Portrait*, 1961
Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002)
Oil on canvas, 46 x 38 cm

further highlights many contemporary Nepali artists. I had the great fortune to meet many of those artists during the *Diverse Expressions* exhibition in 2023; I later encountered these same artists in New York City at the Rubin Museum of Art's *Reimagine: Himalayan Art Now* exhibition in 2024, a testament to their widespread impact on the international art world. Most of these artists will quickly point to Bangdel as a major source



of inspiration, as curator of the Takpa exhibition and renowned artist Tsherin Sherpa notes, "Today, [Bangdel's] work stands as a lodestar for contemporary Nepali artists exploring the tension between the global and the local, the ancient and the experimental. His ability to shift paradigms while remaining grounded in his heritage remains deeply influential."¹³

Lain Singh Bangdel's influence continues, now on a global stage. The artist's *Self Portrait* (1961, Figure 8) and *Mother Nepal* (1979) open the *Transformations* exhibition at the Asian Arts & Culture Center at Towson University in Maryland. Viewing these two paintings together reveals a remarkable coherence. The self-portrait—the portrait of an individual artist who did so much for the transformation of art and art history in Nepal—is just as enigmatic as the *Mother Nepal* figure. Bangdel's face turns from the viewer, his eyes cast downward, perhaps deep in thought. Although the painting is somewhat somber in its

construction with blues and dark colors surrounding the figure, the artist's face remains calm and exudes a sense of contemplation. This portrait of the father of modern art accompanies the motherly personification of Nepal—a similarly intriguing and mysterious figure—as she sits adjacent to a glimpse of historic Nepali architecture peeking over her shoulder. The paintings together tell the story of a complex country; in each one, we see evidence of Nepal's bright future. I end with a quote by critic André

Alexander regarding Bangdel's 1992 exhibition in Kathmandu: "Emotionally and spiritually rich, Bangdel's canvases reach beyond traditional religious and national artistic stereotypes. His wide range of realistic and lyrical creations are concerned, universal statements where his expressions of sorry and joy, laughter and rejection are clear."¹⁴ Bangdel's *Mother Nepal* is more than a mirror of a country's uncertain past; it stands as a testament to the transformations of the present and the possibilities for the future of Nepal.

About the Author

Sarah Magnatta is an assistant professor of Global Contemporary Art at the University of Denver. She curated the exhibitions Tenzing Rigdol: *My World Is in Your Blind Spot* (2018) and Gonkar Gyatso: *Intimacy and Immediacy* (2023). She has published in several journals including *Art Journal*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, and *HIMALAYA* in addition to exhibition catalogs, including an essay for the 2022 Venice Biennale Nepal Pavilion catalog showcasing work by Tsherin Sherpa.

Acknowledgements

Sarah would like to acknowledge her appreciation for the scholarship of Dina Bangdel, the daughter of Lain Singh Bangdel, whom she had the great fortune to know during graduate school. She also thanks Bibhakar Shakya for the invitation to write this essay and dive deeper into the history and genius of artist Lain Singh Bangdel.



Endnotes

¹Don Messerschmidt and Dina Bangdel, *Against the Current: The Life of Lain Singh Bangdel*, (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2004) 136.

²Messerschmidt and Bangdel, 143.

³Owen Duffy, “Moon Over Kathmandu: Reflections on Lain Singh Bangdel’s Art for Modern Nepal,” in *Lain Singh Bangdel: Moon Over Kathmandu*, ed. Owen Duffy, (exhibition catalog), (Queens, New York: Dr. M.T. Geoffrey Yeh Art Gallery, 2022), 10.

⁴Messerschmidt and Bangdel, 162.

⁵Messerschmidt and Bangdel, 169.

⁶Bangdel, quoted in Messerschmidt and Bangdel, 99.

⁷Twenty-five years after Bangdel’s *Mother Nepal*, artist M.F. Husain created his own anthropomorphized India in *Untitled (Bharat Mata)* (2005). Husain’s work clearly draws from the art historical resonance of Tagore’s *Bharat Mata* and its nationalist implications; however, Husain highlights the ongoing devastation wrought through the 1947 partition that separated India from Pakistan (and at the time, East Pakistan, now Bangladesh) by cutting the hands off of the Mother India figure. I argue that Husain may have been influenced by Bangdel’s work—the dual display of love and concern found in *Mother Nepal* is also evident in Husain’s figure.

⁸Duffy, 30.

⁹Personal communication with Bibhakar Shakya, 7 August 2025.

¹⁰Sangeeta Thapa, “Transitions in Nepali Contemporary Art,” in *Nepal Art Now*, eds. Swosti Rajbhandari Kayastha & Christian Schicklgruber, (Germany: Kerber Verlag, Bielefeld, 2019), 60.

¹¹See Swosti Rajbhandari Kayastha, “The Legacy of Lain Bangdel” in *Lain Bangdel* (catalog) (Hong Kong: Rossi and Rossi, 2024), and “Ripple Effects: The Legacy of Lain Singh Bangdel” in *Lain Singh Bangdel: Moon Over Kathmandu*.

¹²“Kathmandu Triennale,” *Kathmandu Triennale* (website), accessed 9 August 2025, <https://www.kathmandutriennale.org/en/story>.

¹³Tsherin Sherpa and Pooja Duwal, “The Art of Belonging: Reflecting on Sir Lain Singh Bangdel,” in *Against the Current: Art, National Identity, and a Modernist Critique*, eds., Janice Glowski and Bibhakar Shakya, (exhibition catalog), (Otterbein University: Ohio: The Frank Museum of Art, 2025), 61.

¹⁴André Alexander quoted in Hong Kong *Asian Art News*, cited in Messerschmidt and Bangdel, 136.

TRANSFORMATIONS, UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL: A STUDENT'S TRIBUTE

Jeevan Rajopadhyay

As a young and aspiring artist in Kathmandu, I often heard the name of the modern painter who had spent a decade in Europe and was now working at the Royal Nepal Academy: Lain Singh Bangdel. Among artists' circles, people spoke of him with awe and curiosity, especially his use of a color palette completely unlike anything we were used to in Kathmandu. I never met him in those early years—he was busy with official responsibilities—but I saw a few of his paintings at the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts and other venues. I did not yet understand his abstractions, but I was mesmerized by his combinations of color. Quietly, I wished I could learn from him. I knew I could never afford Paris; for me, the closest thing to Paris was Bangdel himself.

After he stepped down as Chancellor of the Royal Nepal Academy, he organized a large retrospective exhibition at the Nepal Art Council (Figure 1). I went simply hoping to see his work and, if I was lucky, to meet him in person. To

Figure 1. *Buried Civilization - Lumbini*, 1979
Lain Singh Bangdel (1991-2002)
Oil on canvas, 95 x 171 cm



my surprise, he was gentle, humble, and easy to talk to. Before I had even finished viewing the exhibition, he said something that completely changed my life. He expressed interest in teaching me—and perhaps a few friends—and then told us quietly, “What I learned in Europe in ten years, I can teach you in a few years.” For him, passing his knowledge to the next generation was not a choice; it was a responsibility.

What began with just a few of us soon became a group of about ten students. From late 1989 until 2002, we studied with him in the hall of the Nepal Art Council, at his home in Sanepa, and on outdoor field trips. He provided everything—paper, paint, brushes, tea, food, even transportation—and never charged us a

tuition fee. Most of us came from modest families; under normal circumstances, studying with a Paris-trained artist would have been unimaginable. We could not go to Paris, but he brought the rigor and seriousness of Paris to Kathmandu.

After about five years, he felt we were ready to face the public. He named our group New Art Circle and titled our first exhibition *Color Revolution*. Each of us showed nine or ten works, nearly one hundred paintings in total. The Kathmandu art community knew he was training a younger generation, and there was real curiosity about what would emerge. Some critics said our works were too close to his, but many viewers recognized that something new had arrived—a fresh sense of color that stood in contrast to the dark browns and blacks that had dominated earlier painting in Kathmandu. In many ways, his arrival and influence marked the beginning of what we now recognize as the Bangdel era in modern Nepali art.

Following the success of *Color Revolution*, he organized an art competition in memory of his beloved father, Ranga Lal, in 1998, with categories in oil, watercolor, and acrylic. He instructed all ten of his students to enter in watercolor. It was a tough contest, with many entries, but I was fortunate to receive second prize—a deeply proud and emotional moment, receiving the award from my own teacher.

For me, Bangdel sir became much more than an instructor. He was a mentor, guardian, and often felt like a second father. He taught us not only how to paint but how to live as artists—how to behave at exhibitions, how to speak to journalists, what to look for when viewing other artists' work. He invited us to his home for formal dinners with place cards and quietly showed us how to use forks and spoons, so that if we ever found ourselves at international conferences or hotel banquets, we would feel

at ease. He emphasized studying senior artists in South Asia and abroad, speaking in detail of masters like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Titian, El Greco, Velázquez, Goya, Rembrandt, and Van Gogh.

At that time, I was working as a commercial artist and graphic designer, earning a decent income that kept my family happy. But the job required hard, precise lines, while learning modern painting with him demanded softness, flexibility, and a different sensitivity. My professional work began to clash with my learning. I knew the chance to study with him was rare and would not last forever. One day I took a huge risk and resigned from my job. My family was upset; financially, I struggled. But I could not ignore the pull toward painting.

Even in class, my progress was slow. I was genuinely confused at first and did not understand abstract art at all. Then I began watching him closely—how he mixed colors, how he chose

large or small brushes, how his hand moved across the canvas. He had an extraordinary inner eye for evaluating our work: with a seemingly simple gesture, a tiny speck of color in just the right place, he could suddenly bring a painting to life—like sunlight breaking through on a cloudy, rainy day. It took seven or eight years for me to begin to understand his language of color and abstraction. When it finally clicked, it felt like a kind of nirvana. All the struggle and dedication suddenly made sense. Without him, I would likely have remained a mechanical commercial artist, earning a decent living but feeling empty inside. Because of him, I became a modern painter of Nepal. What he gave me was nothing less than a transformation.

He transformed my practice by transforming my habits. He turned my fear of the blank canvas into a readiness to begin. He moved me from the safety of illustration toward the risk of evocation. He taught me to build a painting, to pause, to scrape back, to wait for layers

Figure 2. *Untitled Abstract*, 2025
Jeevan Rajopadhyay (b. 1960)
Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 120 cm

to dry, to listen to what the work itself was asking. Over time, my colors began to breathe more slowly. Forms lengthened, edges softened, spaces opened. The paintings became less about what could be named and more about what could be felt (Figure 2).



People sometimes ask what he “corrected” most in my work. The real answer is that he corrected my gaze. He made me look longer—more patiently and honestly—at the world outside and the world within. From that gaze came discipline; from discipline, form; from form, feeling. He never handed us a style. Instead, he offered us a way of working and, more importantly, a way of being.

For us, *Transformations* was not an abstract exhibition theme—it was daily reality. We watched him return wholeheartedly to the canvas after long years of public duty and saw what renewal looks like when guided by conscience. During the pro-democracy movement of 1990, his paintings did not shout slogans, yet his *Freedom and Struggle for Democracy* series carried the turbulence and hope of that time through color and rhythm. In the studio, he showed us how spontaneity could coexist with control, how a restrained palette could yield intense energy, how a thinner application of paint could create depth by letting light breathe between layers. He always brought us back to a simple question: What is necessary here?

Transformations reflects the quiet courage Bangdel taught—starting again, removing what is not right, and choosing what is simple and true. It also recalls the patience we learned as paint dried, and evenings when art was not merely a career but a way of life. Above all, it

honors the Nepal he loved and shows how he made modernism Himalayan in breath and universal in language.

It was not only my life that he changed. He altered the trajectory of modern art in Nepal, itself. If he had not returned to Nepal in 1961, our art history would look completely different, and it would likely have taken many more years for the modern art scene to reach where it is today. Modern and contemporary artists working now—no matter their style—are influenced by him in some way, whether they realize it or not. His founding of the Nepal Art Council in 1963 created the country’s first dedicated public venue for exhibitions and talks on art and literature,

and it continues to promote Nepali art and culture globally. He saw this institutional need six decades ago, and it still serves current and future generations of artists, writers, and poets.

This is my testimony, offered with gratitude. If my paintings now hold a steadier silence; if my colors carry weather rather than noise; if my lines have learned to breathe, it is because Sir Lain Singh Bangdel believed I could be a painter and showed me, day by day, how to become the one my life was asking for. He taught me how to use color—and, more importantly, how to paint—and through painting, how to live with a little more truth.

About the Author

Jeevan Rajopadhyay (b. 1960, Kathmandu) is one of Nepal’s leading modern abstract painters and a devoted student of Sir Lain Singh Bangdel, under whose mentorship he studied from 1989 to 2002. His lyrical abstractions—marked by fluid gesture, meditative color, and structural balance—embody the spiritual and aesthetic lessons he absorbed in Bangdel’s Sanepa studio. A founding member of the Society of Modern Artists (SOMA) and an active member of the Nepal Art Council, Rajopadhyay continues to mentor younger artists while exhibiting nationally and internationally. His work stands as a living testament to Bangdel’s enduring influence and to the transformative power of sincerity, humility, and devotion in art.

FROM HERE TO ETERNITY: ROSES, CANVAS, AND THE ART OF SEEING

Suyogya Man Tuladhar

In 2001, I had the honor of inviting the revered Lain Singh Bangdel to inaugurate my exhibition. A friend had urged me to reach out to him. I knew of “Bangdel sir,” of course, but I had never really tried to understand the depth of the man behind the name. After the opening (Figure 1), he surprised me by offering to mentor me and graciously welcoming me into his home. I thought I was about to begin an intensive course in brush, color, and canvas. Instead, my “lessons” consisted almost entirely of pruning the rose bushes in his garden. Day after day, I trimmed, swept, and watered, while he quietly stretched canvases, fixed them with his staple gun, and painted with a concentration that made time feel suspended. He never once allowed me to touch a canvas. Within a week, frustration took root. Feeling confused and disappointed, I walked away from his guidance.

Yet something had shifted. When I returned to my own studio, my work no longer satisfied me. Every stroke felt

Figure 1. Lain Singh Bangdel with Manu, inaugurating Suyogya’s art show, 2001



wrong, every color inadequate. It was as though a new eye had awakened inside me—one that saw more, and therefore demanded more. Months slipped by in this restless state until I slowly began to paint again, only to realize that I was no longer the same artist. The easy joy I once felt had been replaced by a more demanding, sometimes painful honesty. I had outgrown something, without yet knowing what would replace it. Then, one early morning in 2002, the news reached me: Bangdel sir had passed away.

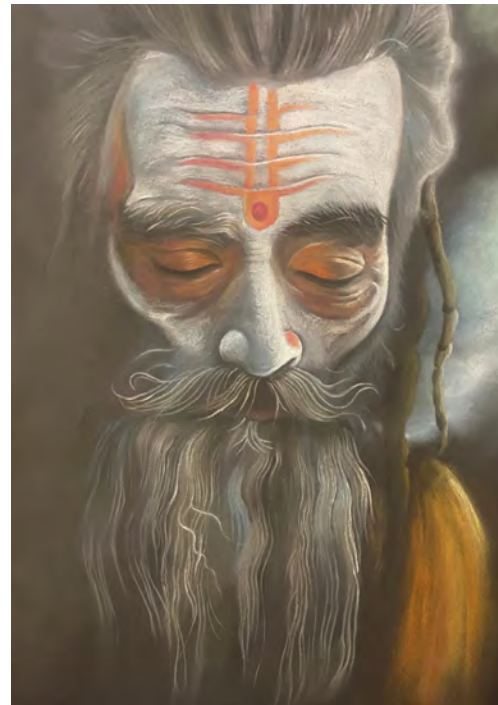
Years later, understanding finally arrived. In those days in his garden, staring at roses until my eyes ached, he had been

Figure 2. *Horizon*, 1977
Lain Singh Bangdel (1919 – 2002)
Oil on canvas, 102 x 178 cm



teaching me to see—the art of seeing. He was refining my gaze before allowing me to refine my hand. He was showing me that looking is an ethical act: you must look long enough, and truthfully enough, that your work can no longer be satisfied with shortcuts. He had nudged open a door within me that I did not recognize at the time. Today, I wish I could thank him. The only way I can reach him now is through my work. He is rightly respected in Nepal as a father of modern art and as the pioneer who introduced abstract painting to the country (Figure 2). One of my favorite works of his, *A Village near Kathmandu* (included in this *Transformations* exhibition), is a painting I first saw in his home in 2001. It has lingered with me ever since; in my own

Figure 3. *The Hermit*, 2024
Suyogya Man Tuladhar
Soft Pastel, 56x36 cm



way, I have tried to honor his influence by echoing its quiet balance of structure, light, and feeling.

His figurative works have also held me captive—the *Mother and Child* series, *Grass Cutter*, and *Flute Player*. They showed me how deeply human a modernist image can be. Inspired by

these works, *The Hermit* (Figure 3) was my humble effort to pay tribute to him. In Bangdel's genius I found solace for my own artistic dilemma: the tension between realism and my yearning to break away from it. In his hands, transformation was not a slogan but a practice—taking the visible world and distilling it into line, plane, and color without losing its soul. For my generation, that is his greatest gift. He showed us that a Nepali painter could stand in conversation with global modernism and still remain rooted in our own landscapes, sorrows, and joys.

Perhaps our brief encounters shaped my path more than I ever realized. Perhaps those days pruning roses, wandering through his home, watching him work in silence, quietly steered me toward the work I would later do in Nepal's animation industry. In hindsight, it feels like a gentle push from a great master—toward originality, perseverance, and an unflinching search for authenticity. He transformed the way I thought about art:

not as decoration or profession alone, but as a way of seeing and a way of living. That inner shift—of standards, of courage, of what I would accept from myself—is, for me, the true meaning of “transformation.” For many years afterwards, I did not paint seriously. Life carried me in a different direction. From 2002 onward, I found myself in the midst of a small renaissance in Nepali animation—surrounded by aspiring, often uncertain animators whom I had begun to train. I felt a responsibility to help build something that did not yet exist: a bridge between academy and industry, between raw talent and real opportunity. With a small team of about twenty artists, we ran an independent studio for five years, reinvesting every rupee we earned into keeping it alive and upgrading our tools. It was exhausting, exhilarating work—a journey of trial and error, but also of transformation: from a handful of dreamers into a functioning studio, from individual ambition into shared purpose.

Eventually, together with a colleague who had left Disney, I co-founded Incessant Rain Animation Studios, Nepal's first international-level animation studio. Looking back, it was a leap that could have easily made me look foolish if it had failed. But, as the saying goes, when you truly want something from your heart, the universe conspires to help. I often think that the courage to take that risk, to hold fast to quality and integrity in a fragile ecosystem, was another gift from Bangdel sir's example: his belief that Nepali art could stand confidently on a global stage without losing its essence. Just as he brought Paris and Kathmandu into a single visual language, I dreamed of bringing global animation practices into a Nepali context, while nurturing local voices.

For many younger artists of my generation and beyond, Bangdel sir is not only a historic figure in textbooks; he is the one who proved that transformation is possible. He transformed the status of

painting in Nepal—from something often seen as ornamental to a serious, modern practice that could carry ideas, ethics, and national identity. He transformed our understanding of abstraction—from something “foreign” and suspicious to a language that could be deeply Nepali, breathing Himalayan light and the inner weather of our own lives. And he transformed the role of the artist—from solitary genius to cultural conscience, teacher, and guide. We may work in different media now—canvas, code, pixels, VFX—but the standard he set still measures us.

Years later, destiny led me back to the Bangdel residence—this time through my acquaintance with Dr. Bibhakar Shakya, who invited me to create visual effects for films he was producing, like *Abhinna* and *Shambhala*. Walking once more through that familiar gate, I felt as if a circle had quietly closed. I was no longer the unsure young painter pruning roses; I had become an artist and studio founder carrying forward, in another medium, the

values he embodied: discipline, sincerity, and the courage to see clearly. What *Transformations* explores on the walls, I have tried to live in my own career: the movement from one form to another, from one generation to the next, without breaking the thread of continuity.

Looking back, I am deeply grateful—to Bangdel sir, and to the Shakya family—for being integral parts of my

creative journey, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Their presence helped shape the artist I became and the artist I still strive to be. If my work today creates opportunities for other artists, animators, designers, and studio owners—through training, collaboration, and shared projects—I see that, too, as an echo of his generosity. In that sense, the journey that began in his garden has not ended; it continues, in every new student and every new image, from here to eternity.

About the Author

Suyogya Man Tuladhar is a Kathmandu-based artist, animator, and creative entrepreneur who has played a pioneering role in the renaissance of Nepal's animation and infotainment industry since the early 2000s. Trained as a painter, his artistic journey began with exhibitions in Delhi and Melbourne in the 1990s and a major solo show at Nepal Art Council in 2001, inaugurated by his mentor, the legendary modern artist Lain Singh Bangdel. Building on this foundation, he went on to co-found TCI Animation Studio, establish Incessant Rain Animation Studios and FireStudios, and found BlackBox Academy, helping to train a new generation of animators and VFX artists. His work extends across creative and tech ventures—from software and IT to healthcare outsourcing—yet remains rooted in a commitment to visual storytelling, innovation, and opportunities for young artists in Nepal.

CARRYING THE MOUNTAINS: A GRANDSON REFLECTS

Deven Bangdel Shakya

I grew up with my grandfather's paintings long before I had the language to understand them. They were simply there: fields of blue and gray that felt like weather, mountains that seemed to breathe, portraits whose eyes followed you down the hallway. As a child in Columbus, Ohio, I didn't know that these works belonged to one of Nepal's foremost modern artists, or that they were part of a larger story about migration, memory, and the making of modern Nepali art. They were just a steady, familiar presence in the background of everyday life.

Only later, as I became more aware of my own place in the Nepali diaspora, did I begin to see how deeply those paintings were shaped by movement and transformation. His journey was not a straight line. From the tea estates of Darjeeling to art school in Calcutta, from the studios of Paris to the temples and streets of Kathmandu, it was a series of crossings and returns—absorbing new

worlds while holding on to the old. His evolution from realist painter to bold abstractionist was not just an artistic shift; it was the visual record of a person continually adjusting, listening, and responding to the times and places he moved through.

Because of this, his work feels surprisingly contemporary. Many of us in the diaspora live in that same in-between space, trying to stay connected to Nepal while building lives wherever our families happened to land. We are always negotiating how to stay rooted without becoming stuck, how to grow without losing ourselves. When I look at my grandfather's paintings now, I see those questions woven into his brushstrokes—in the balance between memory and reinvention, in the way his work holds both belonging and distance at once.

My earliest memories of him aren't in a museum or studio. He first visited us in

Figure 1. Family Photo, Columbus, 1996



Columbus when I was about one, though those moments exist more in family stories than in my own mind. What I do remember clearly is his visit a couple of years later, when I was around three. I remember the joy more than the details: playing hide and seek, running through the halls, laughing with a man who was somehow both gentle and larger than life. The world knew him as Sir Lain Singh Bangdel; I knew him first as a grandfather who got down on the floor to play with

me. That sense of humility and warmth has stayed with me as I've slowly come to understand the public figure he was.

As I grew older, the paintings that once faded into the background began to feel more alive. I started to notice the mystery in the mists of his Himalayan abstractions, the tenderness in his *Mother and Child* paintings, the stillness and weight in his famine scenes from Calcutta. His canvases became a kind of quiet education—not only in color and form, but in patience, empathy, and the courage to face difficult subjects directly.

That education continued through the stories my parents shared. My mother, Professor Dina Bangdel, carried his legacy forward through her scholarship and curatorial work. She helped bring Nepali and Himalayan art into global conversations where it had long been overlooked. She insisted that Nepali culture should not be seen as marginal or “regional,” but as an essential part of world art history. Her insistence on that

point—delivered in classrooms, catalog essays, and exhibitions from Kathmandu to Doha and beyond—has become a guiding force in my own life.

My father, Dr. Bibhakar S. Shakya, has carried this work forward in another way: organizing exhibitions, safeguarding the Bangdel collection, producing films, and building the archival foundations that allow my grandfather's work to travel. Because of his dedication, these paintings now move between museums, galleries, and biennales—entering conversations my grandfather might only have imagined. Watching my father take on this responsibility with such steady commitment has taught me what it means to honor a legacy through action, not just admiration.

Together, my grandfather, my mother, and my father form a continuum of creation, interpretation, and stewardship. Their work has taught me that art isn't

just about objects on walls; it is about how those objects shape a society's understanding of itself. They record histories, imagine futures, and connect people across distance and time. That feels especially important now, as Nepalis around the world rethink what belonging means in a global, digital age.

For the new generation of Nepali diaspora—kids growing up in places like Ohio, Maryland, Texas, Qatar, or London—exhibitions like *Transformations* offer something rare: a chance to see themselves reflected in the story of modern art. Too often, young Nepalis abroad know Nepal mainly through brief visits, family stories, or social media. Encountering Bangdel's paintings and life story gives them another kind of connection—a reminder that someone from our community helped shape a modern visual language that stands alongside better-known narratives from Paris or New York. It is something to be proud of: proof that Nepali experience is

not outside the story of modern art, but firmly within it.

For American and international visitors, these works open a different door. They introduce a history of Nepali modernism that many have never encountered—a history rooted in Himalayan landscapes, migration, and literary traditions, but also in shared global questions: How do we make meaning in times of upheaval? How does an artist remain honest to their origins while engaging the wider world? In this sense, my grandfather's life and work are not just "Nepali stories"; they are human stories with which viewers in Baltimore—or anywhere—can connect.

The themes of *Transformations*—unrest, change, and renewal—also feel deeply linked to what is happening in Nepal today. A new generation of activists, many raised in households marked by migration and remittance economies, is pushing for accountability and

structural change. Their protests and organizing efforts are informed by global movements yet firmly rooted in local realities. Watching these developments from afar, I feel the same mix of distance and attachment that runs through my grandfather's work: the sense that what happens in Nepal is not separate from us in the diaspora, but part of a shared story we are all still writing.

My grandfather believed that art and culture help shape how a society understands itself. Nepal, in the years he lived and worked there, was changing rapidly—searching for a modern identity while still deeply anchored in tradition. Through teaching, writing, institutional leadership, and cultural advocacy, he helped the country imagine its artistic future. That idea of change as a responsibility—not just a possibility—is something I've inherited, even if indirectly. It applies on every scale: personal, communal, national. It requires humility, listening, and a willingness to move

beyond what feels familiar. His life was a reminder that growth isn't something we "achieve" once; it is something we learn to practice again and again.

For my family, exhibitions like *Transformations: Lain Singh Bangdel, Art, Nepal* are also acts of remembrance and continuation. They honor my grandfather's path breaking courage, my mother's dedication to amplifying Nepali art globally, and my father's tireless efforts to sustain and expand this work. They reflect a long-term belief that his paintings should continue to move, speak, and spark connection—that the legacy he built should remain living and evolving, rather than frozen in time.

At the same time, exhibitions like this serve a larger purpose. They help position Nepali modernism within the wider story of Asian and global art, bringing his contributions into conversations that extend far beyond Nepal's borders. They

insist that the story of modern art cannot be told only from Paris, London, New York, Hong Kong or Tokyo; it must also include perspectives shaped in Darjeeling, Kathmandu, and the many cities where Nepalis now live. For the Nepali diaspora, this recognition is a source of quiet pride. For international visitors, it is an invitation to expand the map of modernism they carry in their minds.

Transformations invites us to think about change at every scale. The title speaks to my grandfather's journey as an artist—from figuration to abstraction, from local scenes to universal forms—but it also speaks to Nepal's shifting cultural landscape and the evolving identity of the diaspora. The Nepal he encountered in the early 1960s is not the Nepal we know today, just as the diaspora networks of his time are very different from the creative, vocal, and digitally connected communities that exist now. Yet some threads remain: the pull of the mountains, the resilience of ordinary people, and the

Figure 2. Lain and Deven, Columbus, Ohio, 1998

central role of art and culture in making sense of who we are.

For me, this exhibition is an opportunity to consider my grandfather's life alongside the lives of Nepalis everywhere—those who stayed, those who left, and those who move back and forth between places. It is a reminder that identity is not a fixed destination but an ongoing negotiation between memory and possibility. When I see his paintings now, I think not only of the man who painted them, but of the many lives they touch: the young artist in Kathmandu discovering abstraction for the first time; the visitor in Baltimore who encounters Nepali modernism unexpectedly; the diaspora family who sees a piece of home in a canvas thousands of miles away.

In the end, what moves me most is the quiet generosity at the heart of his work. My grandfather could have kept his journey private, his images

confined to small circles. Instead, he chose to share them—to teach, to write, to build institutions, to mentor, to send his paintings out into the world. That generosity continues to ripple outward. As his grandson, I feel it every time I stand before one of his canvases and sense not only his presence, but an invitation: to look more closely, to think more deeply, to live more truthfully.

I am deeply honored to share his work with you through *Transformations: Lain Singh Bangdel, Art, Nepal*. For many of us in the Nepali diaspora, his paintings offer both a mirror and a compass—a way of seeing ourselves more clearly and imagining where we might go next. For American and international visitors, they offer an entry point into a rich, still-unfolding history of Nepali modern art and cultural resilience. They remind us that even as we change and grow, our roots endure—and from those roots, new forms of connection, courage, and creativity can continue to emerge.



About the Author

Deven Bangdel Shakya studied Fashion Merchandising at Virginia Commonwealth University and spent a formative year of high school in Doha, Qatar. Deeply rooted in his Nepali heritage, he frequently visits Nepal to reconnect with family and to stay engaged with the country's contemporary art scene. A passionate sports enthusiast, he has also served as a high school track and field coach at Collegiate School in Richmond, Virginia, bringing discipline, encouragement, and leadership to his students. Deven remains actively involved in supporting Bangdel art exhibitions and honors his grandfather's legacy through cultural advocacy, community engagement, and writing.

MILESTONES

DARJEELING

- 1919 • Born to a Nepali migrant family in Darjeeling, India
- 1939 • Graduated from Darjeeling Government High School (first in class); recognized for talent in painting and writing

CALCUTTA/KOLKATA

- 1939 • Enrolled in the Fine Arts degree course at Government School of Art (now the College of Arts and Crafts), Kolkata (Calcutta), India
- 1940 • Befriended B.P. Koirala, then a law student (later Nepal's first democratically elected Prime Minister)
- 1945 • Graduated with distinction at the top of his class
- 1947-51 • Worked as a commercial artist at D.J. Keymer Advertising Agency, Calcutta
- 1948-51 • Published three Nepali novels: *Muluk Bahira* (Outside the Country), *Maiti Ghar* (Maternal Home), and *Langadako Sathi* (Langada's Friend)
- 1950-51 • Founded, edited, and published Nepali literary magazine, *Prabhat* (Dawn)
- 1952 • Sailed from Calcutta to Europe to pursue further study in Paris

EUROPE (LONDON & PARIS)

- 1952** • Summer: Studied art in London's museums and galleries; reconnected with Manu Kumari Thapa
- Fall: Enrolled at *l'École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts*, Paris; first Nepali artist to study art in Paris
- 1953** • Married Manu Kumari Thapa (she worked in London and supported Bangdel during his students years in Paris)
- 1953-56** • Studied museums and exhibitions and toured across Europe
- 1956-60** • Relocated to London to join Manu; worked as an Art Director at Astral Art Group (commercial art agency)
- 1960** • Met King Mahendra and Prime Minister B.P. Koirala in London; invited to contribute to Nepal's art and culture

KATHMANDU

- 1961** • Arrived in Kathmandu via Bombay and Darjeeling; appointed a Member, Royal Nepal Academy and Head of Faculty of Fine Arts (Manu Bangdel appointed Matron, Maternity Hospital, Kathmandu)
- 1963** • Co-founded Nepal Art Council; served as a Founding Member and Secretary (Daughter Dina Bangdel born in December)

- 1965-69** • Participated in group exhibitions and public lectures in Kathmandu
- 1968-69** • Fulbright Visiting Faculty, Denison University, Ohio, USA
- 1969** • Lectured on South Asian and Nepali Art at Harvard University; visited major U.S. museums to study Asian collections
- 1974** • Appointed Vice Chancellor, Royal Nepal Academy; chaired Department of Humanities and Arts
- 1977** • Appointed Chairman, Nepal Association of Fine Arts (NAFA)
- 1978** • Served on the International Jury, Biannual Art Exhibition, Dhaka, Bangladesh
- 1979** • Appointed Chancellor, Royal Nepal Academy (first 5-year term), by King Birendra
- 1984** • Reappointed Chancellor, Royal Nepal Academy (second 5-year term), by King Birendra; Appointed UNESCO's Project Director, Inventory of Stolen Stone Sculptures of the Kathmandu Valley
- 1985** • Visiting Lecturer on Art and Culture of Nepal at the Universities of Rome, Milan, and Bologna, Italy
- 1986** • Opened Birendra Art Gallery at Nepal Association of Fine Arts, Kathmandu
- Chief Advisor to archaeological excavations at Hadigaon (Kathmandu) under the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente; Chief Advisor to the Lumbini Development Trust for archaeological excavations at Lord Buddha's Birthplace, Lumbini

- 1989** • Retired from the Royal Nepal Academy; became Life Member
- Appointed UNESCO Advisor to the World Heritage Society
- 1990** • Appointed Honorary Director, Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust; Member, Asia Society, New York, United States
- 1995** • Appointed Chief Advisor, Department of Archaeology, Nepal
- 1998** • Appointed to the Nepal *Raj Parishad* (Royal Council) by King Birendra
- 2001** • Appointed Chairman, Hadigaon-Vishalnagar Preservation and Development Council, Kathmandu
- 2002** • Passed away peacefully on October 15 at home in Sanepa, Nepal

SELECTED ART EXHIBITIONS

- 1940-45** • Student exhibitions, Government School of Art, Calcutta
- 1945** • First independent art exhibition; first sales (landscapes)
- 1954** • Solo exhibition, Stuttgart, Germany
- 1955** • Solo and group exhibitions, Paris, France
- 1959** • Solo exhibition, London, UK
- 1962** • First solo exhibition in Kathmandu (Tri-Chandra College) introducing modernist trends to Nepal
- 1962-65** • Annual small private exhibitions in Kathmandu
- 1965-68** • Group exhibitions, Kathmandu
- 1969** • Solo exhibitions at Denison University (Ohio) and in Washington D.C., USA

- 1990** • Solo exhibition, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA
- 1991** • *Bangdel: Fifty Years of His Art*, Nepal Art Council, Kathmandu
- 1994** • *Anatomy of Colors: Recent Figurative Paintings*, Nepal Art Council, Kathmandu
- 1997** • Solo exhibition, Galleria Curtins, Moritz, Switzerland

NOVELS

- 1948** • *Muluk Bahira* (Outside the Country), Nepali Sahitya Sammelan, Darjeeling
- 1950** • *Maiti Ghar* (Maternal Home), JB Tamang, Calcutta
- 1951** • *Langadako Sathi* (Langada’s Friend), JB Tamang, Calcutta

ART & NATURE

- 1963** • *Bishwaka Chha Mahan Kalakar* (Six Great Artists of the World), Royal Nepal Academy
- 1965** • *Rembrandt*, Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu
- 1976** • *Birds of Nepal* (art director; co-authored with R.L. Fleming Sr. and Jr.)

ART HISTORY

- 1970** • *Nepali Dhatuka Murti* (Nepali Metal Sculptures), Royal Nepal Academy
- 1973** • *Nepali Kalako Mulyankan* (Evaluation of Nepali Art), *Bideh* (Lalitpur),
- 1974** • *Prachin Nepali Chitrakala* (Ancient Nepali Painting),
Royal Nepal Academy
- 1976** • *Samasamayik Nepali Chitrakalako Itihas* (History of Contemporary
Nepali Arts), Royal Nepal Academy
- 1981** • *Prachin Nepali Murtikalako Itihas* (History of Ancient Nepali Sculpture),
Royal Nepal Academy
- 1982** • *The Early Sculptures of Nepal*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi
- 1987** • *2500 Jahre Nepalische Kunst* (2500 Years of Nepalese Art), Leipzig:
VEB AE Seemann Verlag
- 1989** • *Stolen Images of Nepal*, Royal Nepal Academy
- 1995** • *Inventory of Stone Sculptures of the Kathmandu Valley*, Royal Nepal
Academy (Introduction by Dina Bangdel)
- 1996** • *Report on the Study of Iconography of Kathmandu Valley and Their
Preservation and Protection*, Department of Archaeology,
Kathmandu

MEMOIR & BIOGRAPHY

- 1957** • *Yuropko Chithi* (Letters from Europe), Royal Nepal Academy
- 1963** • *Spainko Samjhana* (Memory of Spain), Royal Nepal Academy
- 2000** • *Romeko Euta Phul ra Parisko Euta Kanda* (A Flower of Rome and a
Thorn of Paris), Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu

TRANSLATIONS

- 1945** • *Bishwa Katha Sangraha* (World's Best Short Stories), JB Tamang, Calcutta
- 1968** • *Syauko Rukh* (The Apple Tree, John Galsworthy), Royal Nepal Academy

DOCUMENTARY

- 1978** • *Dev Bhumi* (Land of the Gods); writer/director/producer;
Royal Nepal Academy
- 1981** • *Jyapu*, Chief Advisor, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 1995** • *Interview at Studio and Home*, Nepal Television, Kathmandu

AWARDS & HONORS

- 1965** • *Birendra National Art Medal*, Nepal, for contributions to contemporary and modern Nepali arts
 - *Dulichand Gold Medal*, India, for contributions to Nepali literature
- 1982** • *Gorkha Dakshin Bahu, Class II*, Nepal, for contribution to arts and culture
- 1985** • *Commendatore, Ordine della Corona d'Italia* (Knight of the Order of the Crown of Italy), for contributions to art and art history of Nepal
 - *Chevalier, Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* (Knight of the National Order of Arts and Letters), France's highest honor in the field of arts
- 1986** • *Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order*, United Kingdom, by Queen Elizabeth II, for contributions to art and culture
- 1988** • *Gran Cruz* (Great Cross of Civil Merit), Spain, for promoting the art and culture
- 1995** • Honored by *Sikkim Sahitya Parishad* (Sikkim Literary Society, India) for contributions to art and literature
- 1996** • Honored by Shree Lun Karan Das Ganga Devi Chaudhary Art Academy for contributions to modern art in Nepal
- 1997** • Honored by *Kirat Rai Yayokha* (Rai Ethnic Association) for contributions to Nepali language, culture, and history
- 1998** • Honored by Commercial Artists' Association of Nepal for contributions to the arts

- 2000** • *Prithvi Prajna Purashkar*, Nepal's highest national honor in arts and culture
 - *Uttam Shanti Puraskar* (Uttam Peace Award), Nepal
- 2001** • *Mount Everest Foundation's Nepal Samman-2058* (Nepal Honor-2001), for contributions to society and nation through the media, arts, and culture
- 2002** • Honored by the Bhaktapur Heritage Group and Bhaktapur Jaycees, for contributions to contemporary Nepali art and culture

POSTHUMOUS EVENTS

SELECTED ART EXHIBITIONS

- 2002** • Virtual art exhibition online at Spinybabbler.com (Kathmandu, Nepal)
- 2018** • *Nepal Art Now*, Nepal Art Council, Kathmandu
- 2019** • *Nepal Art Now*, Welt Museum, Wien, Austria
- 2022** • *Bangdel: Moon Over Kathmandu*, Yeh Art Gallery, St. John's University, New York
- 2022-23** • *Bangdel: Moon Over Kathmandu*, Asia Society Texas, Houston, USA
- 2023** • *Bangdel: Mountains and Migration*, Bonhams, London, UK
- 2024** • *Lain S. Bangdel: Against the Current*, Miller Gallery, Otterbein University, Ohio
- 2024** • *Lain S. Bangdel: My Dedication to Art*, Takpa Gallery, Kathmandu, Nepal
- 2024** • *Lain Singh Bangdel* in Hong Kong, Presented by Rossi & Rossi, Hong Kong
- 2025** • *Homeland: Nepali Modernism and the Art of Lain Singh Bangdel*, Emmanuel Art Gallery, University of Colorado Denver, USA
- 2025** • *Lain Singh Bangdel*, Art Mumbai, India, presented by Rossi & Rossi
- 2026** • *Transformations: Lain Singh Bangdel, Art, Nepal*, Asian Arts Gallery, Asian Arts & Culture Center, Towson University, Maryland, USA
- 2026** • *Lain Singh Bangdel: A Premier Modern Artist of South Asia*, Art Basel, Hong Kong, Presented by Tansbao Gallery, Taiwan

ART HISTORY

- 2005** • *Jaya Varma ko Murti ra Nepal ko Varma Vamsha* (The Jaya Varma Statue and the Varma Dynasty of Nepal) (draft completed by Bangdel 2002; edited by Dina Bangdel), Mandala Publications, Kathmandu

MEMOIR & BIOGRAPHY

- 2004** • *Against the Current: The Life of Lain Singh Bangdel – Writer, Painter, and Art Historian of Nepal*, by Don Messerschmidt with Dina Bangdel, Orchid Press, Bangkok
- 2010** • *Muluk Bahira Ma* (When Outside the Country), ed. Dina Bangdel & Devendra Bhattarai, Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu (awarded 'Book of the Year' by Color Nepal)
- 2022** • *Langada's Friend*, English Translation of *Langadako Sathi*, Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu

DOCUMENTARY & FILM

- 2023** • *Abhinna (Inseparable)*, feature film based on Bangdel's novel, *Langada's Friend*
- 2025** • *Have You Seen My Gods?*, documentary inspired by Bangdel's *Stolen Images of Nepal*

INTRODUCTION

Transformations: Lain Singh Bangdel, Art, Nepal explores the remarkable artistic journey and cultural legacy of Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002), widely regarded as the father of modern art in Nepal. Through 25 paintings spanning the 1940s to the 1990s, the exhibition traces Bangdel's evolving vision as he navigated multiple worlds—colonial and postcolonial South Asia, cosmopolitan Europe, and an emerging modern Nepal.

Organized around two central themes—“Expressing & Shaping Nepali Identity” and “The Politics of Everyday Life”—the exhibition reveals how Bangdel's art reflects and reframes the cultural, political, and emotional realities of his time. Within these frameworks, several subthemes emerge: Nepal's historical and spiritual landscape, the symbolism of Kathmandu and the Himalayas, the legacy of colonialism, and the resilience of poetic and personal expression.

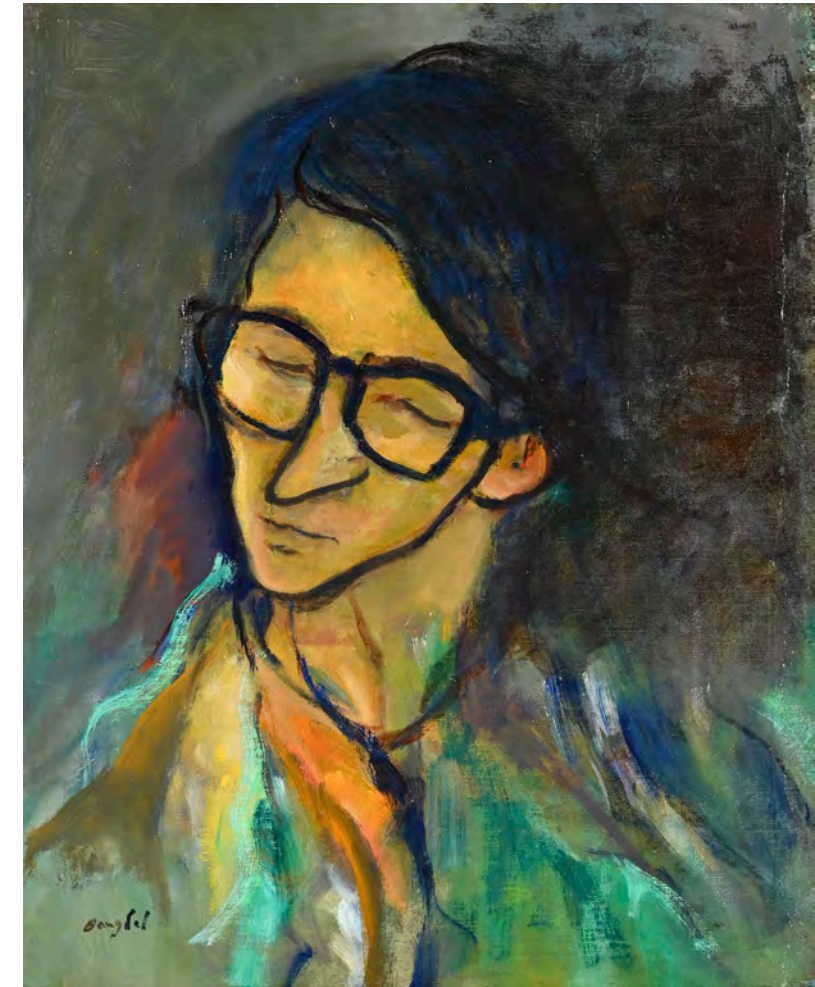


Plate 1. *Self Portrait*, 1961

Painted on the eve of his return to Nepal after a decade in Paris and London, this self-portrait shows Bangdel as a young artist at the threshold of his career. Both intimate and reflective, it marks the beginning of a transformative journey that would reshape the course of modern art in Nepal.

EXPRESSING & SHAPING OF NEPALI IDENTITY: KATHMANDU

A lone barefoot woman, wrapped in a saturated blue cloak and bowed in anguish, stands in for the nation itself—Bangdel’s personification of a grieving motherland. Painted in the wake of the 1979 student protests and national referendum, the work registers his quiet anxiety for Nepal’s uncertain future, even as he maintained that his art was not explicitly political. *Mother Nepal* also reveals the range of his practice: celebrated for luminous abstractions, Bangdel repeatedly returned to emotionally charged figuration, using the human body to convey collective experiences of loss, endurance, and hope.



Plate 2. *Mother Nepal*, 1979



Plate 3. *A Village near Kathmandu*, 1971

This painting reflects Bangdel's deep admiration for Nepal's rural landscapes and living traditions. A small cluster of thatched-roof houses nestles in the foreground while snow-capped peaks rise beyond a soft veil of mist, balancing human habitation against environmental grandeur. More than a picturesque view, *A Village near Kathmandu* is a quiet meditation on rootedness, tradition, and the intimate interdependence between people and the land they inhabit.

Plate 4. *Transformation*, 1956



Painted during Bangdel's Paris years, *Transformation* marks an early, decisive step into pure abstraction. Influenced by his encounters with Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, he builds a dense structure of overlapping rectangular "cells" in white, gray, ochre, and rust that reads like a dissolved urban landscape.

At the center, paired pyramidal forms quietly echo the silhouette of Nepal's uniquely non-rectilinear flag—a motif that also appears in *Moon Over Kathmandu*. What first seems nonobjective gradually reveals itself as an abstract meditation on the modern city and on Bangdel's enduring Nepali identity.

Plate 5. *Old City*, 1961



Painted soon after Bangdel's first arrival in Kathmandu in 1961, *Old City* registers his emotional response to a place he had long imagined but never seen. Coming from Parisian modernism into a "living museum" of temples, shrines, and monastic courtyards, he chose not to depict the city literally but to translate

its impact into dynamic abstraction. Fragmented blocks of ochre, red, blue, and black suggest labyrinthine streets, stacked architecture, and sacred rhythms. The work marks the beginning of his lifelong engagement with Nepal and crystallizes the exhibition's core theme of transformation.

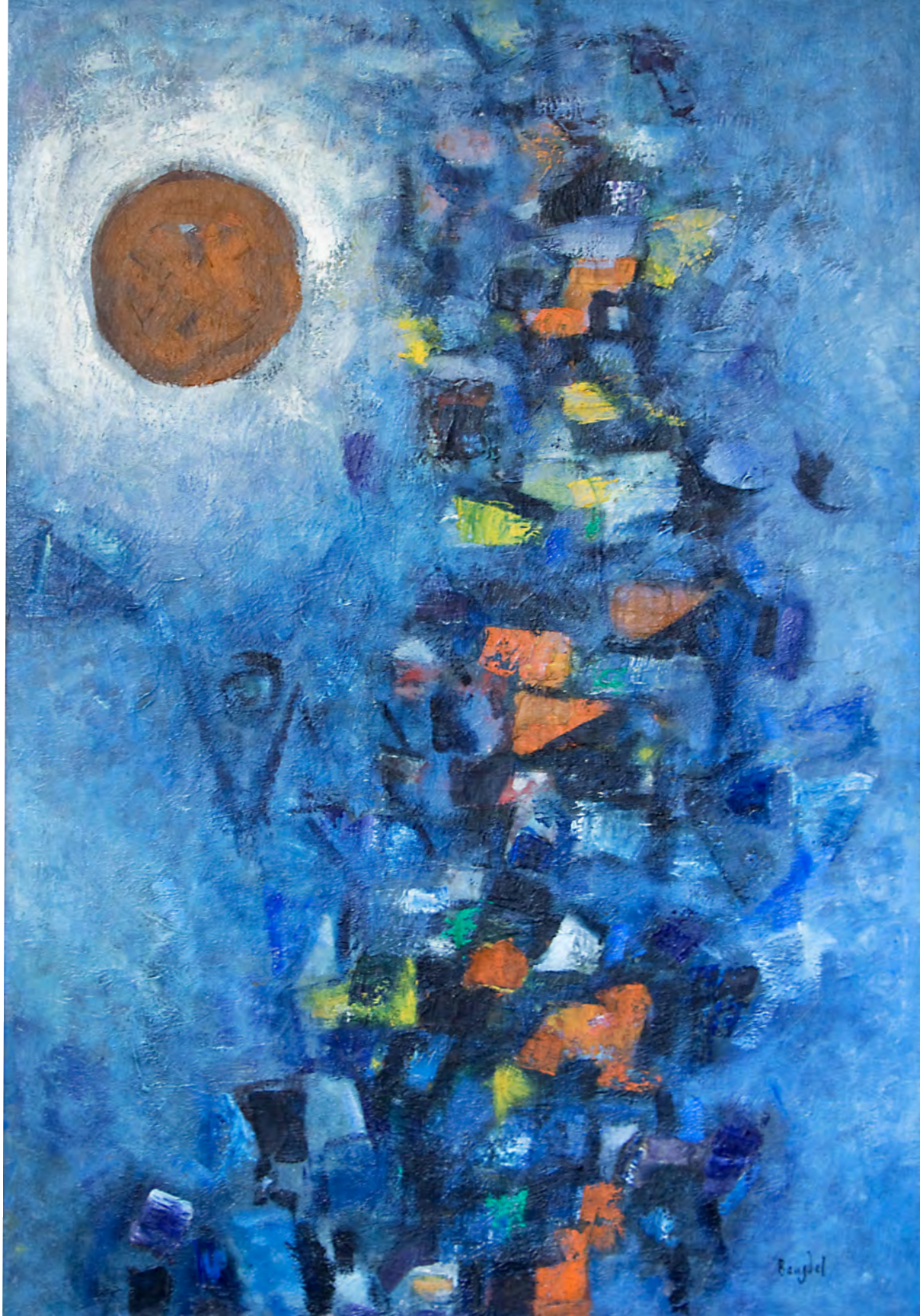


Plate 6. *Moon Over Kathmandu*, 1962

In *Moon Over Kathmandu*, a copper-colored full moon casts pale beams across a patchwork of blues, salmon, yellow, and white, turning the city into a flowing tapestry of light and form. Painted soon after Bangdel's arrival in Nepal, the work abstracts Kathmandu into a vertical river of terracotta-like structures cradled in an indigo valley, where urban density and Himalayan majesty quietly merge. At left, a tiny second moon between twin peaks subtly echoes Nepal's double-pennant flag, making this nocturne a meditation on the modern city, the mountains, and a capital newly open to the world.



Plate 7. *Kathmandu Valley*, 1973

In this work, Bangdel turns from the snow-clad sublime of the high Himalayas to the softer, green embrace of the Kathmandu Valley. Passages of gold, ochre, and emerald—streaked and anchored with black—suggest terraced fields stepping down the hillsides, the cultivated slopes that sustain the valley's agricultural life. Painted more than a decade after *Moon Over Kathmandu*, it redeploys his earlier fragmented language of the modern city toward pastoral quiet, creating a landscape of tempered stillness where modernist structure meets rural tranquility.

EXPRESSING & SHAPING OF NEPALI IDENTITY: MUNA-MADAN SERIES

Lain Singh Bangdel's lifelong admiration for *Mahakavi* Laxmi Prasad Devkota shaped some of his most emotionally resonant early works. Though he met many eminent writers and artists, he often said the one person he most wished he could have met—but never did—was Devkota, his literary idol. The poet died in 1959, two years before Bangdel's arrival in Nepal. In a poignant turn, Bangdel was later appointed to the very seat at the Royal Nepal Academy that Devkota had once held, a role he carried with deep reverence. While in London and Paris, Devkota's masterpiece *Muna-Madan* became both a cultural anchor and a lens through which Bangdel explored longing, separation, and the migrant's dilemma.

Across the four works featured in *Transformations*, he reimagines Devkota's narrative in shifting emotional keys. *Muna-Madan Departing Scene* (1955) and *Muna-Madan* (1959) dwell on the heartbreak of parting—soft pastels, tremulous strokes, and intimate embraces conveying the sorrow of lovers destined not to reunite. In *Distress* (1956), he channels Madan's despair on learning of his wife's and mother's deaths, echoing the sacrifices of countless Nepali migrants. A decade later, back in Kathmandu, *Bliss* (1966) turns tragedy into quiet joy and homecoming, reflecting Bangdel's own reconnection with Nepal. Together, these works form both a homage to Devkota and a meditation on migration, identity, and the emotional truths at the heart of Nepali life.



Plate 8. *Muna-Madan Departing Scene*, 1955



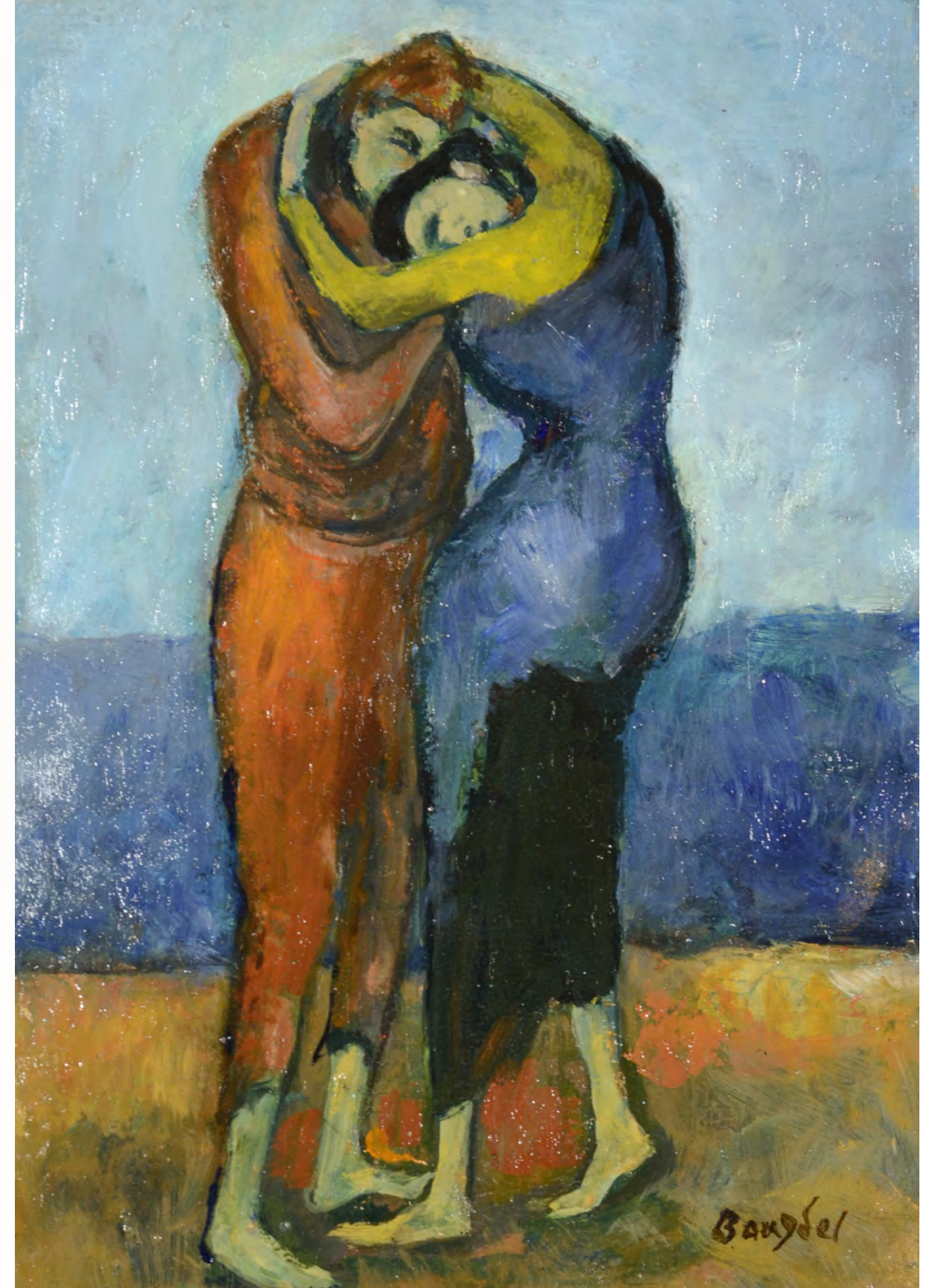
Plate 9. *Bliss*, 1996 (Above)

Plate 10. *Distress*, 1956 (Right)





Plate 11. *Muna Madan*, 1957



HIMALAYAS

EXPRESSING & SHAPING OF NEPALI IDENTITY: HIMALAYAS

From his earliest memories in Darjeeling, the Himalayas shaped Lain Singh Bangdel's inner world. As a child, he watched the sun rise over Kanchenjunga—its snow peaks glowing pink and gold—and later said this vision “imprinted itself on my soul.” Long before he became Nepal's leading modernist, he had vowed to paint the mountain one day. The range became not only a visual anchor but a lifelong emotional and spiritual compass. In works such as *Mt. Kanchenjunga in the Mist* (1971), the summit emerging through clouds, rendered in soft gradations of color, conveys both physical grandeur and dreamlike mystique.

Across his Himalayan series, Bangdel moves fluidly between landscape and abstraction, using each mode to express a different facet of nature's power. In semi-abstract canvases like *Abstract I* and *Abstract II* (1969), painted during

his Fulbright year in Ohio, he recalls the memory of flight over the mountains—fractured whites, ochres, and earthen tones suggesting crevasses, snowfields, and the stark geometry of peaks. Flecks of yellow, red, and blue hint at prayer flags, while the aerial perspective underscores distance, longing, and rediscovery. Works such as *Mt. Everest* (1970), *Clouds over Mt. Everest* (1972), and *Song of Himalaya II* (1979) return to more legible forms: summits piercing veils of cloud, weightless ridges floating in fog, mountain silhouettes articulated with a staccato rhythm that suggests wind, weather, and the sublime.

Together, these paintings crystallize Bangdel's deepest artistic lineage: nature as origin, memory as guide, and the Himalayas as both subject and metaphor. They fuse personal nostalgia, national identity, and modernist experimentation into a unified vision in which the mountains of his childhood become enduring emblems of Nepal's spirit and beauty.



Plate 12. *Mt. Kanchenjunga in the Mist*, 1971



Plate 13. *Abstract I*, 1969



Plate 14. *Abstract II*, 1969



Plate 15. *Mt. Everest*, 1970



Plate 16. *Clouds over Mt. Everest*, 1972



Plate 17. *Song of Himalaya II*, 1979



THE POLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE: FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY

In 1990, Nepal underwent a historic transformation. The People's Movement (*Jana Andolan*) ended absolute monarchy and restored multiparty democracy after decades of political suppression. Though Lain Singh Bangdel rarely made overtly political art, the urgency of this moment stirred something profound in him. Having just completed two demanding terms as Chancellor of the Royal Nepal Academy, he returned to the studio with renewed freedom. What he witnessed in the streets—peaceful marchers beaten, jailed, and even killed—compelled him to respond. Inspired by artists such as Goya and Picasso, whose depictions of political violence he greatly admired, Bangdel felt a moral responsibility to translate the spirit of the times into visual form. The result was his *Struggle for Democracy* triptych and the powerful canvas *Freedom* (1991), among the most emotionally charged works of his career.

These paintings mark a dramatic turn toward pure abstraction. In *Freedom*, sweeping strokes of black, red, and gray collide with flashes of ochre and blue, generating a visceral tension between gesture and form. Rapid, loose brushwork conveys both street protest and inner turmoil. Natural realism disappears; the painting's force arises from the intensity of his emotional and intellectual response to the nation's struggle. The *Struggle for Democracy* canvases similarly translate political upheaval into a universal language of movement, rupture, and renewal. Crowning more than three decades of abstract experimentation, they stand apart in their urgency and moral clarity. In these works, personal liberation, national awakening, and artistic evolution converge—affirming Bangdel's belief that even in abstraction, sincerity is the artist's highest form of truth.



Plate 18. *Freedom*, 1991



Plate 19. *Struggle for Democracy I*, 1991



Plate 20. *Struggle for Democracy II*, 1991



Plate 21. *Struggle for Democracy III*, 1991

THE POLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE: COLONIALISM AND CASTE

Painted during his student years at the Government College of Art in Kolkata, *Suburb of Calcutta* is one of Bangdel's earliest known works and an important glimpse of his emerging sensibility. Instead of grand colonial buildings, he focuses on an impoverished district: a dusty street lined with fragile, makeshift structures and a lone distant figure. Executed in delicate yet precise watercolor, each plank and roof plane is suggested with economical strokes, forming a bric-a-brac architecture that quietly anticipates his later abstraction. Working in a narrow range of browns and earth tones, Bangdel neither romanticizes nor sensationalizes the scene; he offers a restrained, empathetic view of ordinary urban life and an early statement of his commitment to social reality.

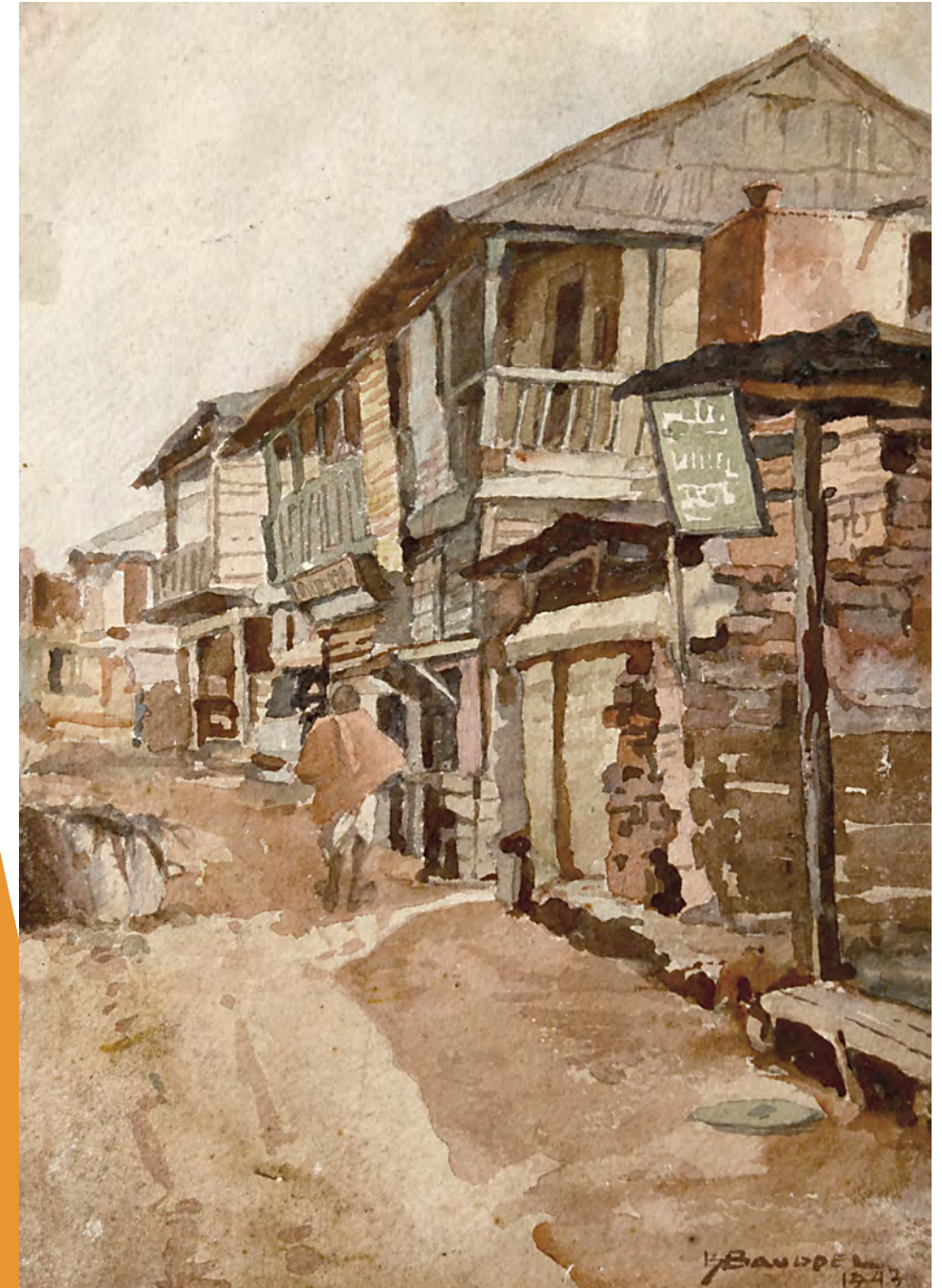


Plate 22. *Suburb of Calcutta*, 1943

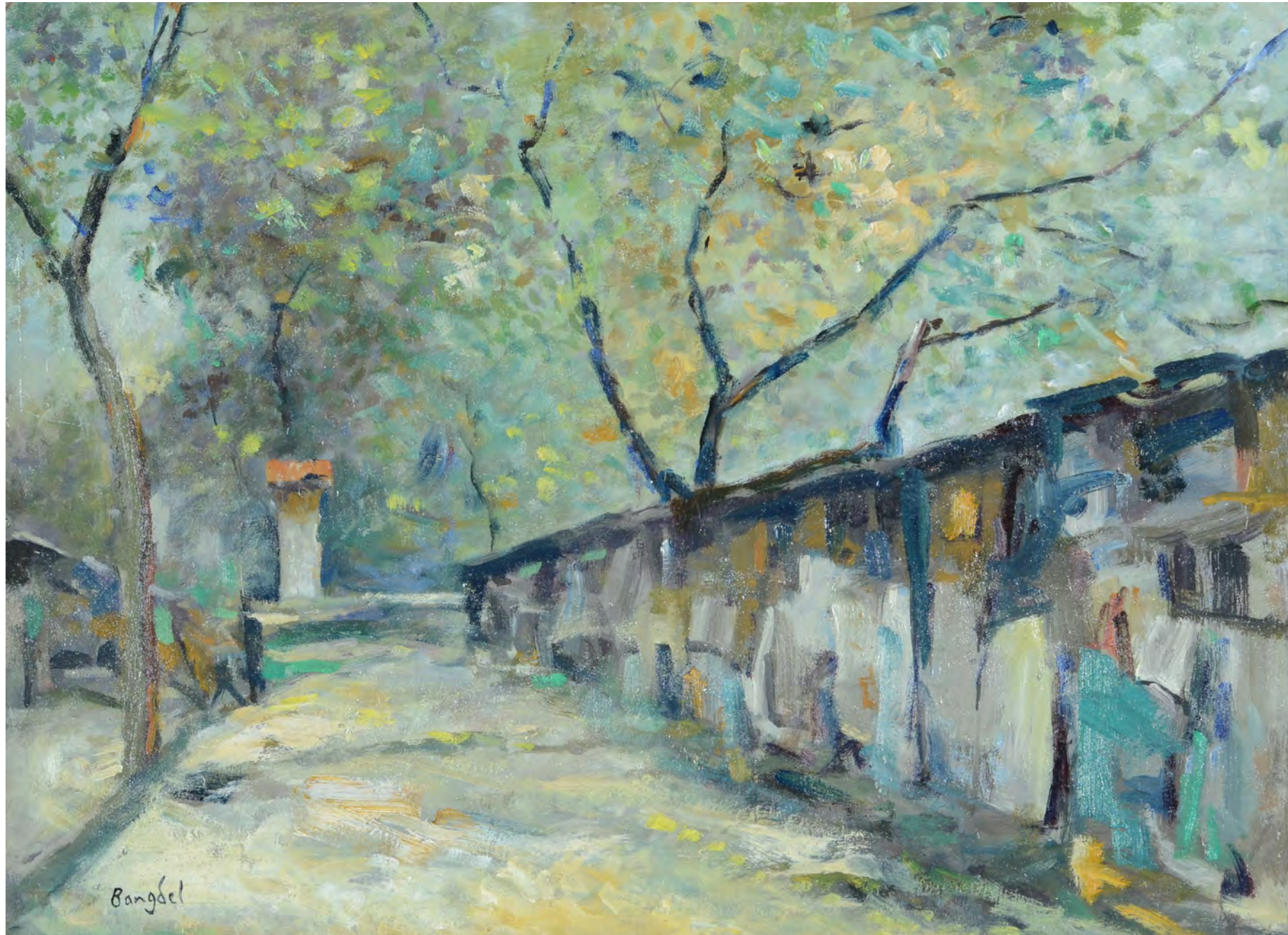


Plate 23. *Street Scene of Calcutta*, 1948

An exercise in perspective, this painting reflects Bangdel's sustained interest in the humble architecture of India's expanding cities, built from brick, tin, and other simple materials. A row of modest shelters lines the right side, their walls constructed from distinct, angled brushstrokes that hover between representation and abstraction. Having grown up in the Himalayan foothills, Bangdel was deeply struck by Kolkata's vast, crowded spaces and by the hardship faced by the urban poor. In the late 1940s he began writing some of the first realistic Nepali novels, empathetically portraying lives long marginalized in literature. *Street Scene of Calcutta* reveals the same impulse in visual form, treating the city not as spectacle but as a lived environment and a stage for human struggle and dignity.



Plate 24. *Famine of Bengal*, 1956-59

Painted more than a decade after he witnessed the 1943 Bengal Famine as a young art student in Kolkata, *Famine of Bengal* is Bangdel's searing return to that trauma. An emaciated mother cradling her lifeless child forms a modern pietà, their gaunt faces and slack bodies surrounded by stark details—an empty bowl, storage bins—that sharpen the sense of desolation. Rendered in muted blue-green tones that recall Picasso's Blue Period and echo the social realism of his mentor Zainul Abedin, the work compels viewers to confront famine as a human-made catastrophe rather than a distant historical episode.

Farmer's Anguish marks a transition between Bangdel's representational work and his move toward abstraction. Painted during his European years, it shows a thin, almost amorphous figure hunched in pain, emerging from a soft pastel ground with only minimal outlines to define the body. The anonymous, frail limbs echo the haunted figures of his earlier famine imagery, shifting attention from outward description to the inner life of the poor and marginalized. Here suffering is not narrated so much as felt. As Bangdel wrote in 1955, his heart was with "the poor and the downtrodden," and he painted not for easy pleasure but to express "the touching melancholy of a suffering world"—a conviction this quietly powerful work embodies.



PLATES LIST

Lain S. Bangdel (1919-2002)

INTRO PANEL



Plate 1: *Self Portrait*, 1961
Oil on canvas, 46 x 38 cm



Plate 2: *Mother Nepal*, 1979
Gouache, 50 x 37 cm



Plate 3: *A Village near Kathmandu*, 1971
Oil on canvas, 67 x 84 cm



Plate 4: *Transformation*, 1956
Oil on canvas, 50 x 65 cm



Plate 5: *Old City*, 1961
Oil on canvas, 61 x 79 cm



Plate 6: *Moon Over Kathmandu*, 1962.
Oil on canvas, 81 x 56 cm



Plate 7: *Kathmandu Valley*, 1973
Oil on canvas, 61 x 76 cm

EXPRESSING & SHAPING OF NEPALI IDENTITY: MUNA-MADAN SERIES



Plate 8: *Muna-Madan Departing Scene*, 1955
Gouache, 34 x 23 cm



Plate 9: *Bliss*, 1966
Oil on canvas, 36 x 28 cm



Plate 10: *Distress*, 1956.
Gouache, 33 x 23 cm



Plate 11: *Muna Madan*, 1957
Oil on canvas, 27 x 19 cm

EXPRESSING & SHAPING OF NEPALI IDENTITY: HIMALAYAS



Plate 12: *Mt. Kanchenjunga in the Mist*, 1971
Oil on canvas, 97 x 79 cm



Plate 13: *Abstract I*, 1969
Oil on canvas, 127 x 113 cm



Plate 14: *Abstract II*, 1969
Oil on canvas, 127 x 122 cm



Plate 15: *Mt. Everest*, 1970
Oil on canvas 29.25 x 22.5 inches.



Plate 16: *Clouds over Mt. Everest*, 1972
Oil on canvas 24.5 x 20.5 inches.



Plate 17: *Song of Himalaya II*, 1979
Oil on Canvas, 104 x 122 cm

**THE POLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE:
FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY:**



Plate 18: *Freedom*, 1991.
Oil on canvas, 109 x 119 cm



Plate 19: *Struggle for Democracy I*, 1991
Oil on canvas, 107 x 151 cm



Plate 20: *Struggle for Democracy II*,
1991.
Oil on canvas, 112 x 107 cm



Plate 21: *Struggle for Democracy III*,
1991.
Oil on canvas, 113 x 132 cm

**THE POLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE:
COLONIALISM AND CASTE**



Plate 22: *Suburb of Calcutta*, 1943
Watercolor, 30 x 23 cm



Plate 23: *Street Scene of Calcutta*, 1958
Oil on canvas, 43 x 58 cm



Plate 24: *Famine of Bengal*, 1956-59
Oil on canvas, 66 x 99 cm



Plate 25: *Farmer's Anguish*, 1958
Oil on canvas, 61 x 46 cm

SPONSORS & SUPPORTERS



Asian Arts & Culture Center (AA&CC) at Towson University appreciates these generous supporters for making **Transformations: Lain Singh Bangdel, Art, Nepal** possible:

E. Rhodes & Leona B. Carpenter Foundation; Citizens of Baltimore County; Maryland State Arts Council; Yoshinobu & Kathleen Shiota; Bangdel & Shakya Foundation; Ro & Marius P. Johnson Charitable Legacy, Inc.; AA&CC Members & Donors; TU College of Fine Arts & Communication; Robert Mintz & Beth Arman; Anthony & Bonnie Montcalmo; Denise Benskin; The Deb-Jaden-Kyla Kielty Foundation; Richmond Conservation Studio; Global Merchants & Logistics; Sarah Magnatta; Suyogya Man Tuladhar; Jeevan Rajopadhyay; Swosti Rabhadari Kayastha; Deven Bangdel Shakya; Redd Family Fund; and Kala Kulo.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This exhibition and catalog, *Transformations: Lain Singh Bangdel, Art, Nepal*, began with a warm afternoon in Baltimore in early 2023, when my wife, Salina, and I visited our dear friends John and Berthe Ford at their residence. They welcomed us with their characteristic grace, shared tea and a long conversation, and offered us a private tour of their remarkable art collection. At their urging, we visited the Walters Art Museum and met Dr. Adriana Proser, Curatorial Chair, who generously guided us through the galleries, including the extraordinary John and Berthe Ford collection. We were deeply moved by that visit. When Dr. Joanna Pecore proposed dedicating this exhibition to the memory of John Gilmore Ford (1928-2024), it felt especially meaningful to us given his connection to and love for Nepal. A discerning collector and generous patron, John played a vital role in advancing the study and appreciation of South Asian art—supporting both traditional artistic heritage and the work of modern and contemporary artists.

His vision helped bring these arts into wider public view and inspired many scholars, curators, and art lovers along the way. We miss him dearly.

We shared with Adriana our wish to organize a meaningful Bangdel art exhibition in Baltimore. She suggested that we explore the possibility of a Bangdel exhibition with the Asian Arts & Culture Center at Towson University and kindly connected us with its director, Dr. Joanna Pecore. After many months of emails, conversations, and planning, that early idea slowly took shape as *Transformations*. Nearly three years later, we are honored to see this vision realized in Baltimore. I offer my heartfelt thanks to Joanna for her leadership, care, and determination in bringing this project to life.

This exhibition also stands on the shoulders of earlier Bangdel projects and collaborators. I am deeply grateful

to Dr. Owen Duffy, who curated the first major Bangdel exhibition in the United States and helped carry it from New York to Houston, London, Ohio, and Denver; to Dr. Janice Glowski at Otterbein University; Dr. Yang Wang, Jeff Lambson, and Andrew Palaram at the Emmanuel Art Gallery, University of Colorado Denver; Priya Singh at Bonhams, London; Fabio and Mauro at Rossi & Rossi in Hong Kong; and Jill Lu at Tansbao Gallery in Taiwan. Their belief in Bangdel's work laid essential groundwork for this new chapter at Towson.

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